November 2003
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 18

Published by
The Amberlin Group, LLC.

Chief Editor - Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor - Brendon Taylor
Contributing Editor - Jeff Wheeler
Contributing Editor - Melissa Thomas
Associate Editors:
Peter Dahl
JW Wrenn
Rochelle Buck
Mark Reeder
Steven Richards
Matthew Scott Winslow
Usman Tanveer Malik

Graphic Design - Jeremy Whitted
Art Director - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director - Reuben Fox

Marketing - Jeff Wheeler
Legal - Brendon Taylor

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@deep-magic.net

Cover by Don Dixon
"Quasar B"

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2003
The Amberlin Group, LLC

Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Writing Challenge 4
Fantasy Short: *The Garden of Lost Dreams* 13
Featured Artist: Don Dixon 14
SciFi Short: *Secrets of an Alternate . . .* 16
Article: The Art of War: sort of . . . 17
Fantasy Short: *The Lost Colony . . .* 22
Deep Magic Looks at Books 23
The Geek's Guide to Grammar 27
Artist Profile: Steve Missal 28
SciFi Short: *Magic Bullet* 29
Fantasy Novel: *The Rise* 30
Science Fiction Novel: *Procyx Book 3* 31

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@deep-magic.net, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

November 2003

I don't know about you, but it's November, and I'm still wearing shorts. Lest you be jealous, remember summer lasts from February through December in Texas sometimes. And there is something to be said for a true winter wonderland. It's just not as much fun putting up holiday lights when it's eighty-five degrees outside. I, of course, bought my holiday lights back in July when they went on sale with the wrapping paper and Singing Santas. Yep, I got one of those too, because I can't resist the kitsch of an Elvis medley sung by a large fellow in a red suit.

We have a bit of an eclectic mix for you this month. "The Garden of Lost Dreams," by Lynn-Marie Braley, may seem like the ideal afterlife, but it makes prisoners of those with the noblest of intentions. "Magic Bullet," by TP Keating, is a throw-back to the detective noir of the old Hollywood black and whites, only with a magic twist. "Arob Arot," by Anne Stickel, delivers you to the Lost Colony, and a lyric tale of love and sacrifice. Mark Reeder's "Secrets of an Alternate Universe" takes you to an entirely different world altogether—is it the lint trap in the dryer, or some surreal Arizona? Both of our novels, Procyx and The Rise, wrap up this month to what I'm certain will be eager demands for more.

Jeff Wheeler chimes in this month with a look at "The Art of War." Contrary to popular belief, it isn't all slash and dash. (You mean they actually plan those things?) Our poll this month will be on the website rather than in the magazine, so be sure to go and vote. Your favorite Grammar Geek will be doling out another lesson for the writing crowd, and you can look forward to our excellent book reviews as well. Also, if you haven't visited our message boards in a while, be sure to check in, drop us a line, and perhaps toot your own horn in our Shameless Self Promotion forum. As always, we bring you the best in genre artwork from Don Dixon and Steve Missal. Fantasy artists may not be a dying breed, but topnotch artists like those we have here in Deep Magic are few and far between. Do take a moment to visit their websites and drop them a compliment or two.

Then sit back, put your feet up by the fire, or on top of the ice chest, and enjoy our November issue of Deep Magic!

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers. We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

November 2003 Writing Challenge

Sometimes the little details of a person's life can give something away about that person even if they are not there. Learning to tap into those little life details can help flesh out a character -- even when that character isn't on the stage. The writing challenge for this month is to create a setting for an absent character. The setting is visited by a narrator (which can be an actual person or an omniscient point of view). There should be clues left in the details that will reveal something about the missing character. The object is to develop a character through observation of the setting. The place can be any kind of locale - a castle, a specific room within a castle, outdoors, a cell, even a bed. The description must have enough specific details so the reader can imagine the "absent character" even though they're not present. Avoid stereotypes. Remember, the goal is to create a setting that tells us about a character even though they aren't there.

Don't limit yourself to these suggestions, but to kickstart your creativity, feel free to *visit our message boards* and use any of the "absent character" examples we've suggested.

Selections from the October 2003 Writing Challenge

Song In the Night
Bear Singer, Deer Rider
Lord of Waters

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

In The Wheel of Time, by Robert Jordan, Rand Al'Thor transcends from being a simple sheep herder to a man who leads nations into war, and who, if Jordan ever finishes the series, will personally face the great lord of darkness. Along the way, he taps into an enormous magical power that enables him to draw lightning from the heavens, bind a person with air, and call balefire -- a molten liquid that not only obliterates as it strikes, but turns time upon itself (not unlike Superman flying around the world to save Lois Lane).
Supernatural, or magic, powers are common in fantasy and science fiction. In fact, they have been used so many times, authors find it difficult to put a fresh spin on these themes. That is what we challenge you to do this month... Create a unique ability or power and give it to an individual. Then write a scene where the individual either discovers this power or uses it in front of others. It should be a unique or exceptional ability. Examples could include telepathy, flight, super strength, etc. However, the more unique, the better. Set your scene in a fantasy or science fiction setting. No word limit, but be reasonable.

Song in the Night

By John Lowe

The flames licked the logs with a grim crackling laugh, while the two men gazed into its golden light. They had sat thus, uneasy in spirit, waiting for the return of their companion.

"She is obsessed with finding that man," said the one, dark of complexion and resting cross-legged. His friend looked up a moment, before answering. His sharp eyes could detect once again the deep feeling expressed all over the other's face.

"Had a kinsman of mine been slain by foul craft, nothing short of death itself would stay my hand," said the other, his fair red hair hanging lank about his shoulders.

"True enough, but Angela becomes more and more possessed with this one goal, the closer we come," said the first. "Not for all my arguments, and the deep mist tonight, could I stop her from scouting about. I wish you had not told her of the footprint, Elisar."

"She would have continued on this search without us, had she suspected I was withholding anything from her," answered the second. "At least we are still present, but I fear we will need to look for her very soon. This mist does grow thicker, and the swamps filled with evil that can entrap any man. Fortunate for us that the footprint of the man we want, indicated his flight into the trees. The forest is still alive, though more evil it becomes with every day that it feeds on the power of the swamp."

"Always feeling with your elven powers. I wish that I was as much in tune with the world around me as you and your race are," said the first.

"It is not hard, even for a man, to feel the waters of life and death, Saris," replied the elf. "If you but stop and listen with your soul, and not with your ears, the waters will lap about you and speak."

"Well, I think I'll try to do as you suggest in the future, but right now, I think we better find her."

"Indeed, her delay worries me."

The two men stood up, their weapons already in their hands since they had made camp. The moon was full, yet it only deepened the darkest shadows.

The mist, a blanket of penetrating white, embraced them with its chilling soul, grasping and choking, trying to still the heat within them. Saris shivered despite himself, and held his torch aloft. The darkness of the woods seemed to refuse to budge, waiting till he had advanced a step, before giving back so much as it would, before his light.

"Hold, Saris, something is not right," said Elisar, touching his friend on the shoulder. The elf's face was one of confusion. "I do not understand it. No presence seems near, but Angela should be close at hand unless she has gone too far within. Still, I sense she is not here."

"What do you mean?" asked Saris, suddenly alarmed.

The elf said not a word, but turned back towards the darkness that engulfed the swamp. His figure was stiff and unmoving, as if he had become stone and rooted to the spot. As if by signal or to belay its mirth, the mist cleared briefly, to show the skeletal trees and blackened forms that had sunk into the murky gray mud beyond. There was no breath of life there, just the silence that follows the dark.

"Madness! What could have caused her too?" cried Saris, despite the feeling that the night

wished him silent.

"Evil, Saris, evil caused her too."

Without waiting for another word, both quickened their stride and plunged into the grasp of the swamp. The elf led, looking for the surest path that would take them safely in, but whether it would lead them out again was something neither wished to ponder. Saris for his part, wished to call out for Angela, but something always held him back. They had not gone long, when, something made itself known. One presence, and then many, all waiting in silence beyond their sight. The elf and man stopped, and attempted to penetrate the darkness with their eyes, but nothing could be seen but the mist, and the deceptive light of the moon on the few feet in front and behind them.

"Who are you?" asked Saris suddenly, his heart leading him to address the darkness. There was no response.

"You called us, you waited for us, and now we have come," said Elisar, in a voice that rang of command. "If there be any pride or honor left to you, speak, and do not lie in wait like cowardly beings."

"Speak not of cowardly beings, oh trespassers to our domain," thundered a harsh grating voice. If it were human, it little resembled it now, except for the power of command it bore. The elf and man stood their ground in amazement, as the mist suddenly swept away, revealing a flat broad space within the swamp, where the moonlight shone down clearly. There within stood five clad in black, hooded and concealed within the cowls. Straight with bearing they kept their place, each with arms at his side, eyes of flame within their concealed faces.

"Doest thou not know that place you tread, and who be the prisoners within it kept?" asked the lead figure, his skeletal hand pointing with accusation towards the two men. "In life we walked this foul earth, and of Fortune's children, the most cursed of all. So wearied of life, with pain and anger raging, we here have come at the end of days passing. For this is known to those of old, the Swamp of Bitter Souls. Here we fester and tear at flesh, never ending the madness of wrath, till time be ended and the void doth calls us. Weep and wail for the lost children of sadness, for they return not to the life of men."

"Speak of our friend, and we shall leave you," said Elisar, when he found his voice. Though elf of old and evil seen, he found that within his chest his heart beat quicker beneath the death filled stares of the lost souls, the shades of the swamp.

"Another of tortured mind and heart, she shall remain within the fold," replied the lead figure, suddenly moving aside with his fellow shades, to reveal a young woman laying on her back in the swamp, her golden hair mingled with the gray mud that threatened to suck her down to the utter depths.

"Angela!" cried Saris, and moved to reach her, but the shades halted him with their words of hate.

"Stand, fool, and do not rush to ruin, lest you wish to join the restless dead! We have longed for fresh blood and soul, and now we feast upon the pain of sorrow within, knowing no more the feelings of life that was once in us, but now but shadows doomed to wander evermore."

"I will not leave her to your curse!" cried Saris, holding his sword before him, though in his heart he feared he was to meet his doom. "Lift it shade, and let her return to the living where she may be healed of her anger and pain."

"What are we to show kindness?" asked the shade, lifting his pale dead hand. "Thrown to torment are we, and pleasure at thy expense shall be our deeds."

Saris felt a great fear sweep over him, as if a cold body was embracing him, one long

dead. His mind was filled with scene after scene of pain and suffering in the world of man, and all of those who had died at the hands of cruel men. Tears streamed down his eyes as he gave a great sob, and fell to his knees before the shades. He was drifting now, with absolute certainly, towards the black gates which they demanded he pass. In his heart, he cried farewell to all he knew, as insanity awaited him beyond. Then, as if over great waters, a voice was heard.

"Hold, shades of darkness," commanded the voice in perfect calm and peace. "Too long has evil begot evil, and sorrow been the end of days. Finish this lie, the hopeless despair, for know again that which was true."

Elisar had finished speaking, and while all listened to him in silence, he stretched out his hands at his side, and as he breathed deeply of peace that few there had known, a light glimmered in the east. Soft at first, like rising sun, but lo it was born on wings that had no heavenly course to ride. Its golden beak and shimmering feathers, filled the darkness with a light it had never known since sun was cast out beyond the gates of mist. The creature alighted on the elf's shoulder, and lifted its head to the sky with a glittering eye. Then it sang, a song so beautiful and clear, that its power touched every hurt and burning despair. It sang of days of laughter, of mornings golden and new. It sang of love, young and fresh, vibrant and like a candle in the night. It sang of life, so filled with sorrow, yet joy and happiness too. It sang of quiet thoughts and deep meanings, lost to those that are never still. It sang of peace, of rest at the end of day. It sang of forgiveness, and friendships of old once again renewed. It sang hope, born anew that never dies.

Forever it seemed the bird sang, and Saris found himself weeping as one does, meeting an old friend again. The fear and pain had departed, and the sorrow was reconciled to itself, seeing the hope of a new day. It seemed then that he felt a great sigh well up within him, but it was not he that sighed, but the very air about him. It was the shades that sighed.

"I feel," said the shade when it spoke again, almost as a whisper to itself. "Oh rend me not, feelings of remorse for a life wasted in self pity and anguish. To even wrath comes and end, for the soul is not one with the dark, but a willing slave to it if allowed. Should I, now that have tasted life again, depart again to the cold alone? No, for all that was held is gone, and my mind again returns. To home again I cannot return, but in peace, sleep of one departed go."

The shade turned to the prone form of the young woman, and lifted his hand once, and a pale cloud that had lingered unseen over her, disappeared into the night like the mist. The shade withdrew as Saris approached the woman who opened her eyes as if one asleep.

"Saris?" she asked, seeing nothing but him. "I have had the most awful dreams. I'm too weak to walk, will you please carry me away. I fear I have acted foolishly."

Saris was surprised, for this was not how she usually spoke, she being so self reliant and harsh towards his kindness. Something had changed her, and even now he could see that she was still in another world altogether, for she seemed not to see the shade that still loomed large before her. The man did not wait to question the change, but lifted her from the mire that may have been her grave. Elisar watched, as the man carried back the young woman who had fallen back to sleep. The shades stood for awhile and waited, then all but the one vanished into the night.

"Is there more to say?" asked Elisar, the golden bird still perched upon his shoulder. The shade was still for a moment, but then lifted its gaze from the earth, and met the eye of the elf. The flames had died from its eyes, and only a shadow remained within the cowl.

"Return she will, to the land of the living, but I alas must go. Say not words good or ill, for this night is all that remains to me," said the shade. "To rest and the halls of my kin I now

retire, remember this moment always, for in the house of time it was once so, that in bitterness I walked, but no more, I go, I go." And with that, the shade vanished from the earth.

Elisar and Saris watched a moment longer, as the mist that had surrounded the swamps disappeared like the shades, as if it had never been, and the first light of a new morning shone down on a land that might yet be reborn.

Bear Singer, Deer Rider

By A.M. Stickel

Neyatla shaded her eyes from the late summer sun, looking for bears. The sea was a thin gray line on the horizon. The lowland where she stood was a sea of a different kind, where blueberries formed the waves. Bears, who could hide in them, did not like to share those waves with anyone.

To be on the safe side, Neyatla intoned, "Going to Evergreen," her bear chant. She walked toward the choicest bushes, stepping in rhythm as she went. Out of respect for bears, she kept changing her song to suit them. Sometimes she rhymed it, sometimes not. Singing high, then low, loud, then soft, she shook her fringed tunic so that the shells on it clacked together. She had gathered the word sounds from travelers and from our people. Even though she did not know what all of them meant in her own language, she improvised. Her instinct for what appeased bears had never failed her.

> "In the dry time of the year, when the mountains beckoned Bear
> To search the stars in the sky, to hunt and fish for dreams
> Sweeter than the best honey and longer than life itself,
> We two went where Evergreen, mightier than mortal man,
> Strode softly in solitude, wearing mossy mukluks.
>
> Falcon and Hawk rode his wrists, Owl and Squirrel his shoulders.
> His robe, woven of glowing mist, held closed by Eagle and Raven,
> Floated about his shapely limbs. His hair was pungent pine needles,
> Which whispered when he walked and crunched into soil underfoot.
> Pinecones encircled his neck and waist, thighs and upper arms.
>
> Before him, eyes like flaring flames, ran White Wolf and Gray Wolf,
> Racing the wind with mouthfuls of wood, stacking their sticks in piles
> Resting on an empty streambed. When the piles were up to the banks,
> Rains came to swell the stream, but snow sunk the ice-heavy stacks.
> Watching his wolves with their wood, we wished we knew what it meant.
>
> 'Ask me anything,' we heard him say, 'because, I love you.'
>
> 'Cunning as Cougar crouching on cliffs, daring as Deer drinking dew,

We followed Fish past foaming falls, in pursuit of nothing we knew.
Within winding ways of canyon walls, something slipped away too soon.
Our wildest wishes flew into the sky, to touch and kiss the moon,
To ask one who loves Bear and I to teach us a dreamer's tune..."'

In the midst of her chant, strange magic overcame Neyatla so suddenly that she collapsed. She lay shivering within a silent swirling whiteness.

* * *

Tekonen clung to the neck of Ingli, the lead buck. The rest of the village herd had disappeared into the storm. How could a blizzard come about in midsummer? Such a thing was unheard of. The wind cut through his thin garments, impaling him and his mount on its icy claws. He grew so numb that he felt he would lose his grip, fall, and shatter like broken ice.

Just as Tekonen began to sag into the inevitable drop, he heard a girl singing. Her voice came closer and closer, but he could not quite make out the words. He began to feel warmer, and even thought he smelled blueberries. Had he already fallen and frozen in his final sleep?

Ingli heard the singing too. The buck seemed drawn to it, almost as if he could see his way through the falling snow. He snorted and shook his heavy antlers. Obviously the deer had caught the scent of sanctuary, for he began to run forward, huffing out great steamy breaths.

Tekonen's heart raced in time with Ingli's hooves. He held on with all his strength.

* * *

Afraid to stand, Neyatla crawled along the misty ground, trying to feel her way back to the bushes. Her hands turned blue with cold from the hard-packed snow she touched. Pausing to blow on her aching fingers, she felt a great wind pass over her head, and heard a soft thud. An oddly clothed young man with wide, dog-pale eyes and almost white hair sat on the ground staring at her. He clutched the reins of his mount. Standing over them was the largest reindeer buck Neyatla had ever seen. He calmly shuffled to her, snorted, lowered his great antlers, and licked her full in the face!

Neyatla pinched herself on the cheek. She must be dreaming. Or maybe she had really gone to Evergreen with a man who must be part sled dog.

Dog Eyes leaned forward and touched her face where she had pinched herself. He tried to rub the spot as if to see whether her brown skin was really white underneath, or, perhaps, merely make sure she was real. Her slap turned his hand red. He put the stinging hand against the cool ground. The look he gave her was so much like a punished pup that she had to laugh.

Smiling at each other then, the two stood together. Even though she had to look up at him, she could tell he was afraid to help her up because of the slap. He pointed behind her. Neyatla turned to see that they were both in the midst of the berries. All around them bears were stuffing themselves. A pair of cubs tumbled in play at Neyatla's feet, ignoring her. Tekonen boldly took Neyatla's hand. He showed her how to mount Ingli. He led the buck in the direction she pointed, back towards the summer camp of her people.

On the way he taught her new words our people sing to this day when we pick berries. We call this "Evergreen's Answer". The words were so beautiful that Neyatla did not even mind going home without berries.

And Tekonen, who became Deer Rider to us, knew better than to complain that she had thought of him as Dog Eyes that day. After all, her song had saved his life. Following their first meeting, his instinct for how to please Neyatla never failed him. Did it have something to do with Ingli? Was it because of the magical message in the words? No doubt, it was both.

"As wood in water, locked in tight,
Dragged out and dried, gives heat and light,
Dream magic mingles sun and rain.
It chews on joy and swallows pain,
With words to say, held in like prey,
Frisks with Fox and Rabbit and Lynx,
Learns Coyote's vanishing tricks,
Seasons tomorrow with songs of sorrow,
From golden noon, makes midnight bloom
Red sunrise, pink sunset, evening gloom,
Flows to flower pathless forests,
Rises in tower-clouded tempests,
Curls, with Beaver and Bear, asleep
By pools of peace, secret and deep…
You stand between life and death today.
It is up to you to go or stay."

Lord of Waters

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

Even as Hanor walked into the town, he knew that there would be no peace for him there. It was a big town, big enough to have its share of bounty hunters, sell swords, and lowlifes–the sort who knew him only as an opportunity to have their purses filled. He would stop there only long enough to eat, drink, and refill his water keg, then would be on his way.

The sky was dim and gray overhead. An oppressive silence filled the air. Rain would come soon. Hanor encountered a mere handful of others as he began to penetrate the maze of buildings that made up the town, and he was glad of it. Fewer people to gaze suspiciously at his haggard appearance and the swaying keg that he carried slung over his back.

He saw an inn that looked cheap enough for his needs and stepped in. His sandals slapped heavily against the wood slat floor. The landlord, a sqaut, greasy man, stepped up to greet him. Hanor did not notice a man who, after peering at him very intently, slipped out of the door behind him. "Greetings!" said the landlord. "You'll have whatever your heart desires, so long as you have gold to pay for it."

Good. At least this one didn't recognize him. "Food for one, and your best ale," Hanor said, moving towards a table. He sat upright, so that his water keg didn't spill out onto his head and shoulders. The innkeeper glanced at it, curious, for a moment, but refrained from asking its purpose.

Hanor had worked halfway through a generous portion of meat, bread, and cheese when he glanced over to the inn's entrance and saw a troop of men entering. All had weapons, either poorly concealed beneath their robes, thrust through belts, or clutched in grimy hands. Hanor sighed, draining the last of his ale and patting his water keg to make sure that it was still there.

The mercenaries advanced in a great mass, their predatory gazes fixed upon him. One of them, an evil looking man with a battle axe in his hands, stepped forward and spoke. "You're the one they call 'Lord of Waters'?"

"Some know me by that name," said Hanor.

"And you know that sheriffs and lords for hundreds of miles around have bounties out for your death?"

"Sadly, yes."

"Then let's get on with it." Sneering wickedly, the man raised his battle axe for a strike which, if completed, would easily divide Hanor's skull.

Hanor focused his energies up the his water keg, drew a small globule of pure water from it, and telekineticly hurled it at his attacker. As it flew, he chilled its molecules and reshaped them according to his will. By the time it reached the thug's neck, the water had transforming into a sharp dagger of clear ice. It slammed into the man's throat. He fell, his battle axe crashing down with him.

Hanor stood as the crowd of thugs drew back in shock. He drew two tendrils of clear water from his keg. They slithered down his shoulders, leaving wet trails on his clothes, and wrapped themselves around his forearms. Hanor froze them into ice, broadening them out until they formed two crystalline slashing blades. "Leave, and I won't have to hurt you," he said, raking at the air with his blades.

For a moment, the bounty hunters swayed in their resolve. Then, one of the ones in back shouted, "He can't take all of us! Come on!"

They rushed him, swinging knives, cudgels, sickles, hatchets, and swords. Hanor slew the first two, unskilled warriors with open defenses. He melted the icicle in the axeman's throat, re-froze it, and sent into flying into the neck of another thug across the room. He formed more ice daggers from the pure water in his keg, and they found the throats of Hanor's attackers.

He dealt with any who got past his storm of frozen daggers with slashes ice blades on his wrists. When they chipped or broke, he immediately reached out, melted the fragments, and welded them back onto his arms as fresh ice. They soon became wet with blood.

But still, there were many more thugs. Hanor could reassemble his ice daggers almost as fast as they could be smashed, but the bounty hunters were learning to dodge them. They pressed around him, and as it became more difficult to defend himself he could put less of his energies towards his ice daggers. And much of his water was now too impure with blood for him to manipulate easily. For the first time since the fight had begun, Hanor began to seriously fear for his safety.

Then, just as one of his arm blades was half shattered by a glancing sickle blow, a jolt of thunder rolled through the inn. The drumming of rain on the roof and the street outside followed a moment afterwards. Hanor pressed all his remaining water aside from that which was frozen on his arms into two great chunks of ice, and with their assistance he battered and cut a path for himself through the bandits. He ran for the inn's door, passing the landlord who was quaking in a corner, his face a livid white.

Then he burst out into the rain. The remaining thugs followed him, fanning out along the front of the inn. Both Hanor and his attackers were wounded with cuts, bruises, and scrapes.

"Leave me alone now, and I will spare your lives," said Hanor.

At first, it seemed like they were going to take his offer and flee. Then, a lone voice reignited their greed: "There'll be twice as much gold for us if we slay him now!"

They rushed at him again. Hanor focused his energies on the falling raindrops. He drew them together–hundreds, thousands. He formed two enormous scythe blades out of thick ice, and swung them telekineticly. The rain water was so pure, so easy to manipulate. The great blades fell upon his attackers as they came at him, killing men in bunches. He formed other groups of raindrops into enormous chunks of crystal ice and threw them at those who ducked under the scythes and came at him, fueled by desperation. Through it all, Hanor just stood with his arms crossed. The time for use of his own limbs was past. Within a few moments, the bounty hunters were all dead, slashed and battered by Hanor's cold weapons.

He sighed, melting the great blades and chunks into liquid. Hanor heated them up further, and soon a cloud of steam was rising up into the still pouring rain. The blades on his arms poured to the ground, leaving the sleeves of his robe drenched.

Hanor reached into his pocket and pulled out a few silver coins. He tossed them to the inn's landlord, who was standing aghast in the doorway. "That's for the meal, and to help clean up. I'm very sorry that this had to happen."

Then he turned and began to walk back towards the town's gate, gathering fresh rainwater into his keg as he did so. Perhaps somewhere he could find a place where people would not hunt him because of his power, both blessing and curse.

The Garden of Lost Dreams

By Lynn-Marie Braley

Large tears of rain dropped from the sky as he stepped through the edge of the forest and into the trees. The Storyteller had seen the gray clouds hovering above the verdant leaves of the wood of Tristus since the night he arrived in Parsallus. The little town was no different in appearance from any other town the Storyteller had visited, but beneath the hustle and bustle, he could sense an underlying anxiety. Friendliness was not one of the town's strong suits, but the innkeeper had been more than willing to share information about the town's local folklore.

"Every month, at the time of the moon's full hiding, the clouds fall down from the Mount of Dolor." Here the man had pointed through the window, toward the towering form that dominated the horizon. "The clouds come to rest above the wood of Tristus, and people from all over Athera walk into the wood, never to be seen again. I have spoken to many of them, and they bring a sense of gloom to Parsallus. We are always glad when they have gone to whatever fate befalls them within the wood."

The Storyteller was fascinated by the lilting tone of the man's voice, and asked him if he was a Storyteller. The man shook his head regretfully, the light gone from his eyes.

"I ran out of stories long ago, young one." The innkeeper swallowed, as if trying to hold back tears. "I am searching for my wife. I have been searching for her for the past ten years. I am wondering if she is there, in that wood."

"But you do not search for her in the wood."

"I cannot enter the wood. None have ever returned, and if she is not there… What if I am not able to leave, to continue my search? The past ten years would have been in vain."

The woman in the violet dress came toward him, hand steady on the scabbard at her belt. The Storyteller saw the long rapier in that scabbard and the anger in her eyes.

The Storyteller recognized the look in the man's eyes. It was that of a man who stood on the edge of a cliff and was preparing to jump off into oblivion.

Then, the innkeeper glanced at the Storyteller, the knowing look in his eyes tinged with a plea. "Perhaps you will be the one to bring that story to us. Perhaps you can tell me if my wife is there."

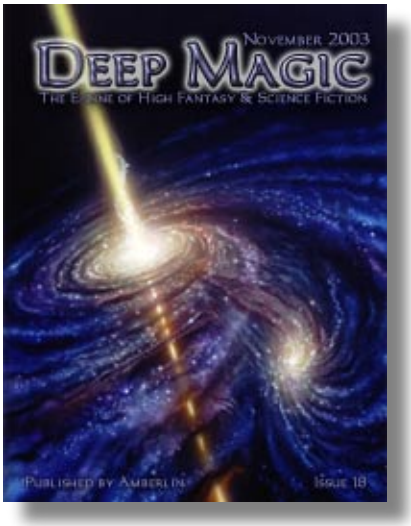
He nodded. "Perhaps."

"You will do it. I can see the Master Storyteller within you."

On the strength of a town legend and the story of an old innkeeper, he now stood within the wood of Tristus, gray light pouring down through the trees along with the rain. Water dripped off his hood and in front of his eyes, and a heaviness of spirit pressed down on him. He was not the only one in the wood. To his left a man stumbled along, hands groping at bushes and tree branches. He seemed oblivious to his surroundings, his voice calling out a name in a despairing wail. The harsh sadness of that voice grated against the Storyteller's ears, but he followed the man hoping that he would lead him to…what? He was not even sure of what he was looking for.

continued on page 32

Featured Artist
Don Dixon



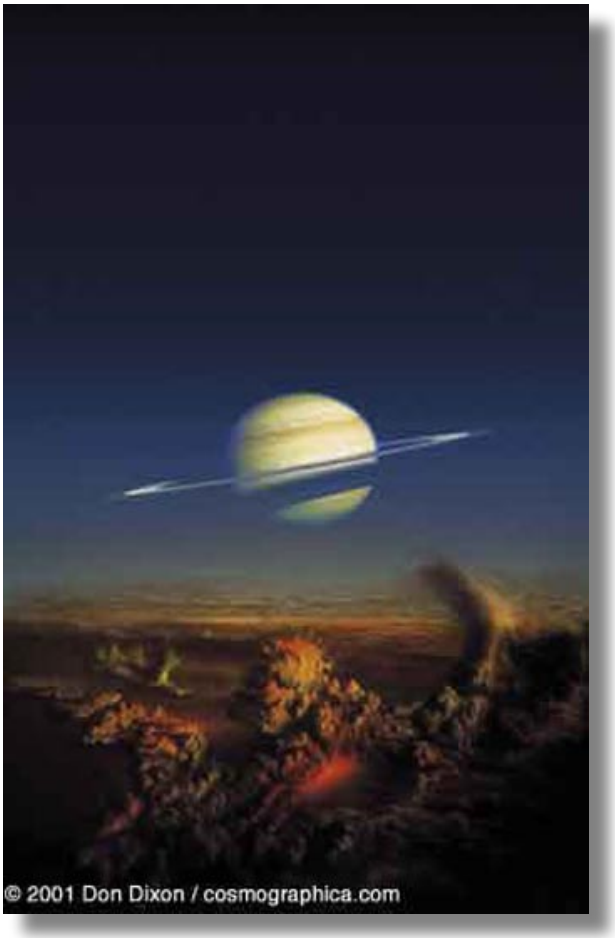
Age: 52
Residence: Long Beach, California
Marital Status: Married
Children: 3 boys
Hobbies: travel, fencing, reading
Favorite Book or Author: Mark Twain, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein
Started Painting In: 1964
Artist Most Inspired By: Chesley Bonestell
Mediums You Work In: oils, acrylics, gouache, digital
Schools Attended: U.C. Berkeley, Physics major
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Scientific American, F&SF, Smithsonian, Sky and Telescope, Astronomy
Website URL: www.cosmographica.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: The first drawing I can recall creating was of a meteor, observed from the back seat of my grandfather's Studebaker when I was about 4 years old. It was rendered in crayons and was apparently of sufficient quality to permit my grandfather to identify the object that had so startled me.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Scientific illustration that occasionally borders on art

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: The beauty and mystery of nature as revealed by science

Q: What inspired this piece?
A: Originally commissioned for the June, 1998 cover of Scientific American, this is a traditional painting, created with airbrushed acrylics and gouache on illustration board, depicting a collision between two galaxies, the larger of which harbors a huge black hole at its core. It is currently on display in the Scientific American offices in New York.



This has been one of my more popular paintings. A variation appears on the cover of Gregory Benford's forthcoming novel of the far future "Beyond Infinity" (Warner Books, March 2004).

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Chesley Bonestell, Vermeer (for his use of light), Stanley Kubrick ("2001")

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Painting, at last count, 10 covers for Scientific American.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Growing maturity in the literary realm, ever-diminishing imagination and intelligence in the cinematic (with a few notable exceptions, of course, such as "Minority Report").

Secrets of an Alternate Universe: How to Live in a Second Dementia

By Mark Reeder

Everything is curiouser and curiouser when viewed through the looking glass. So I told myself as I angled the pocket mirror to see deeper into the lint trap.

Stringy bits of fiber and fluff clung to the metal sides.

"Fuzz!" I said, or something like it.

I scratched my head. The dryer was old, the sort frequently found in apartments of graduate students. The lint trap was up and to the left, difficult to see and get into. Fifty minutes ago I had placed two argyle socks into the now empty dryer. I wiggled the toes of my left foot, warm and cozy, encased in brightly colored wool. My right foot rested cool and clammy on the stained and pitted linoleum.

That sock has to be in there someplace.

I leaned back and set the mirror aside. I wanted that other argyle—needed it, actually. My grandmother knitted the pair. That afternoon I planned to hit her up for an advance on my tuition at Arizona State University. Quantum mechanics and cosmology care naught about food and shelter. The landlord and grocer care naught about Shroedinger and Einstein. My grandmother provided for their grand unified field with the nib of her pen.

I leaned back and set the mirror aside. I wanted that other argyle—needed it, actually. My grandmother knitted the pair.

I gauged the opening and my hand; a close fit, but then I'm not built like a linebacker. I decided I could snake it through. Stretching my fingers, I slid them into the narrow slot. Knuckles scraped the folded metal edge. I jiggled my hand and it slid another half inch. My fingertips brushed something soft.

"Ah . . . I've got you," I said.

I took a deep breath and forced my hand further into the opening. The skin hurt, but I ignored the pain. I could almost grab the material now. I shoved hard and heard the click of an electrical connection. The blades of the dryer drum began to move slowly.

I blinked.

"It's unplugged . . . isn't it?" I said to no one in particular, my art major roommate gone for the day. I knew I had been in a hurry; on the other hand, the door was open. The dryer couldn't start up with the safety switch engaged, right?

The vanes whirled faster and faster. A puff of electrically heated air blew against my face. I tried to yank my hand free, but it was stuck fast in the lint catcher.

No need to panic . . . just wriggle it around gently, I told myself. I flexed my fingers and twisted them slowly.

I felt a tug on my fingertips.

I suppressed an urge to yelp and pulled frantically. The tug became insistent. Something wrenched my arm upward, and I slammed against the dryer. Moments later, my wits returned.

continued on page 41

The Art of War: sort of...

By Jeff Wheeler

> "So, unless your village is being attacked by Mongols or Orcs or something, I would advise taking as long as possible to learn the sword."
> --Jack Collins (posting on *Sword Forum International* General Discussion Forum)

A friend of mine who is a regular on the message boards of *Sword Forum* sent me a URL to a discussion thread about the length of time it takes to properly learn how to wield a sword. The thread was interesting, especially the last line (quoted above), and caused some rumination on the subject. That's not to be confused with remuneration, which is a different subject entirely.

Maybe it was watching re-runs of David Carradine's *Kung Fu* that started it. Maybe it was all the times I rewound the fight scenes of the cult classic *Big Trouble in Little China*. It could have been all the late night D&D sessions. But if I want to pinpoint a single moment in time that inspired me to study martial arts, it was an article I read as a teenager. The article, author unknown, was a martial arts practitioner who trained and worked out at Dimond Park in Oakland, California. I still remember the article – still have a copy of it too – and the black and white photos of a middle-aged man wearing black, striking intriguing poses with swords.

So maybe it was all of these influences together.

When I began college, I also started studying martial arts. I took a two-month long course of Shotokan karate at a local community center, but that didn't impress me. I wanted something more classic, more…interesting. Flipping through the phone book, I discovered a Kung Fu school that was near the place where I worked. And so that began my introduction to northern Shaolin Kung Fu – which has always reminded me of my favorite *Far Side* cartoon about the Shaolin School of Plumbing. But I digress.

Because I was a history major in college, I like to give little history lessons now and then. Some think that's boring, but asking questions is what history is all about. Where did modern martial arts originate? How long does it take to learn how to chop off someone's head with a sword? (The short answer, of course, is "not long at all if they're holding still.") How can someone who's never been in a sword fight write a good sword fight scene?

Excellent questions all, I'm glad you asked. Granted, the last question isn't exactly a historical question, more of a writing question, but I'll let that slide since I want to answer it.

Where did modern martial arts originate?

"When you take the pebble from my hand, it will be time for you to leave." This is a classic quote from the television series *Kung Fu*, my first introduction to the Shaolin fighting system. What I did not realize as a youngster was that the Shaolin system is the oldest martial art – so to speak. The term *martial art* really refers to the study or practice of killing people. That's not really the nicest way I could put it, but if you look back over several thousand years of history, it's a recurring theme. The Chinese just learned to do it with panache.

But interestingly – for me anyway – the Shaolin temple in northern China was not the

continued on next page

origin of Shaolin Kung Fu. A Zen Buddhist monk/prince from India named Bodhidharma started it in 600AD. The monks of the Shaolin temple were so pitifully out of shape they could not meditate properly. And so he taught them some simple exercises to toughen them up. There is still a Shaolin temple in northern China today and the monks there are pretty tough. They learn fighting techniques and feats of discipline that, in all honesty, would make you wince. How many schools do you know of that teach students to break hard objects over their heads, do push-ups in the snow, lick red-hot sword tips, and drag rocks with their testicles? Do you think I would make something like this up? Fortunately, I got married, moved, and never progressed to Iron Body training. I'm still a little squeamish about the rock-dragging thing.

So if Bodhidharma started Shaolin techniques in 600AD, the martial art is about fourteen hundred years old, and by my calculations, makes it the oldest martial art. Granted, folks have been fighting since Cain and Abel, but do you know any Assyrians today claiming to be practicing the chariot techniques of King Sennacharib? Probably not.

Training in Chinese martial arts is done teacher to student through a rote series of hand-foot – and sometimes weapons – techniques. This choreographed dance is called a "set" (in Japanese, it's a *kata*). I do not know how many different sets there are in the traditional Shaolin system – possibly hundreds. In about two years of weekly study, I learned six – including a staff set and a broadsword set. I remember one particular night when my teacher (one of the senior students) came to class with a black eye. It made me raise my eyebrows and ask, rather impertinently, "So what happened?" He smiled tolerantly and replied, "A sucker punch. But he only hit me once."

Shaolin Kung Fu, like many martial arts, has evolved over the centuries. Derivations of it began to crop up. My school also taught Tai Chi (which is kind of a very long Shaolin set done in slow motion), Wing Tsun (a simplified nuts and bolts version of Shaolin), and Hung Gar. Hung Gar is interesting because it developed in southern China and has hauntingly similar themes to Shaolin, but it is a much more aggressive, close-range, in-your-face approach that scares away Shaolin folks who prefer to swoop in from a distance and swoop out again. If you couldn't tell, I also really enjoyed *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* – except the flying parts which they neglected to teach at my school.

Traditional martial arts – the ones that derive from Kung Fu – are descendants from the Shaolin temple, so to speak. Many forms like Karate, Judo, and Aikido were developed in Japan much later. In fact, Aikido (made famous by Steven Seagal) has really only been around a hundred years. It's a baby martial art, but don't ever call one of the practitioners a baby. They could break your bedposts. I took Aikido for a semester at San Jose State. Fun stuff, but not my first love.

A misperception I would like to address next is that Europe did not have "martial arts" during the Middle Ages. Remember my earlier definition of what a martial art is. It's the study of how to kill people – the art of war. You may be surprised at how adept a German swordmaster was back during the 1400's. While my training in Shaolin Kung Fu came from my teacher, who learned it from his teacher, who learned it from his teacher on and on back through the ages, we do have some written evidence of European martial arts, German ones especially. More on this later.

How long does it take to learn how to chop off someone's head with a sword?

One of my favorite scenes in cinematographic history is the fight with the Orcs at the end

continued on next page

of *Fellowship of the Ring*. There is a lot of cleavage in that scene – no, not the sexual kind. The actors and actresses of the *Lord of the Rings* films were given intensive martial training. They learned how to use weapons and practiced fighting stunt people. Every move, every chop, every thrust was choreographed. Brilliantly. And they got *paid* to learn it. Rough job, folks, even living in New Zealand. Really, my heart bleeds for them.

In the Shaolin system, the broadsword was the last of the six sets I learned. I know how to twirl a sword like Conan (the Barbarian not O'Brien), do a tornado kick, land with it behind my back, and then unfold with a down chop to split someone's head open. I know just enough to realize that I've barely scratched the surface, and that I would be scared to death if I ever had to use that weapon in a fight with someone who knew as much or more than me. Not that I wouldn't mind taking out a few Orcs, but even with the training, I feel scarcely qualified to pontificate on the subject.

There is no way to simulate the impending fear of death or dismemberment – other than drinking too many cappuccinos and watching Braveheart on a big screen. But sometimes life gives you a little taste. When I was in Manhattan a few months ago, I took a wrong turn walking to a subway station at ten o'clock at night and ended up in an unfriendly part of New York City. There was one particular moment when someone slipped over the subway turnstile without paying and started following me. In my mind flashed a dozen techniques I had learned studying Kung Fu. I had several good options and decided that if there was going to be trouble, I shouldn't waste time worrying about it. I stopped, settled into a standing horse stance where I could get a good view of him, and pretended to grab a paper from my jacket pocket, ready to drop my bag and let loose. Fortunately, the fellow walked past me. I followed him down the stairs and onto the platform, which was crowded thankfully, and made it safely back to my hotel. There was that heart-pounding moment of nervousness and uncertainty. But I do remember feeling calm, even after, and that is one positive perk about having trained in a martial art. This might sound like I'm a little bit paranoid, but I do work for the company that coined the phrase: *Only the paranoid survive.*

In reality, I will probably never put in practice all the complicated moves I've learned. Even in a real fight. I would not do a tornado kick unless I was 100% certain my opponent was so dazed my daughter could shove him over. It is the basics that matter most to me. The stances, the footwork, the ability to move and change direction and focus. In my school, they say it takes a hundred days to learn the staff and a thousand days to learn the broadsword. I think I know why. It's much easier to hurt yourself with a broadsword.

Another one of my favorite movies of all time is *The Princess Bride*. I'll admit it, I've used the word "Inconceivable!" more than once in a casual setting. The best scene, of course, is the duel between the Man in Black and Inigo Montoya. Fencing is another great example of a European martial art. I wondered for a long time who would be more deadly – an Italian fencing master or a Shaolin monk with a broadsword. Fortunately for all of you, I have the answer to that question. My Shaolin instructor was a nationally known fencing master. I asked him.

"Who would be more deadly? An Italian fencing master or a Shaolin monk with a broadsword?"

His reply. "It depends."

I never said the answer would be profound. And he's right. A fencing master versus a Shaolin monk? What skill levels do they both have? What conditions? A man can get killed just as easily with a rapier as with a broadsword. I am not trying to trivialize the answer. So much depends on the level of skill each has attained. I am confident I would do extremely well against

continued on next page

a fifteen year-old who has never touched a sword in his life. I'm equally confident that our editor on staff who has extensive training in Aikido could probably kick my patootie. That fifteen year-old could probably take Jeremy, though.

So the short answer to the question of how long it takes to learn the sword is, again, "not long at all if they're holding still," but realistically, it does take some time to become comfortable and familiar with a martial art, or a sword, or a bow, or a duck. And it takes years of study to master it. I am not there yet, but I do get up at five in the morning and practice. And practice. And practice. You never know when you might end up in a dark corner of New York.

How can someone who's never been in a sword fight write a good sword fight scene?

This is for all of the authors out there. I do not want to give the impression that unless you study at a Kung Fu school for several years, you may as well toss in the broomstick and write political thrillers instead. The art of writing, like any martial art, is one of practice and refinement. The art is to *convince* your reader that you truly do know how to fight with a Scotish claymore even if you've never hefted one. And how do you do this? I've found that using specific details is a big help.

Here are some ideas.

In 1467, a German swordmaster named Hans Talhoffer scribbled some drawings to document his techniques. His *Fechtbuch* (or "Fightbook") was published as *Medieval Combat* and is available at Amazon. This is an excellent resource for writers. The book consists of page after page of Talhoffer's drawings and translations of the labels. For example, the images demonstrate a number of stances such as the 'iron gate', the 'squinting' guard, and the 'fire-poker'. The illustrations depict real examples of techniques that were using during the 15th century. I think you would be surprised at how many of the images show the defending swordsman holding his weapon by the blade and knocking someone on the head with the hilt like a hammer. There is a myriad of fight scene potential in a book like this.

Another way to learn material would be to purchase or rent a martial art training video. After leaving my Kung Fu school, I purchased the videos of the sets I learned so I would be able to re-teach myself certain portions in case I lost them. Eleven years later, I realize it was a wise choice. The videos show the applications of the movements as well – an excellent way to choreograph a fight scene in a book. The human body can do some amazing things. But seeing "how" a martial artist does something can increase the realism of a scene and not overly stretch the fight scene's credibility.

There are also some excellent literary sources for military-minded writers. I would recommend the following for some background information on military thinkers of the past. These all contain interesting anecdotes that can put you in the mindset of someone from a different time. For example, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is a good place to start. He was a famous Chinese general. And as a bonus, it's short. Julius Caesar's *The Gallic War* is another excellent treatise on military matters. It also reads like a fantasy novel, as Caesar attempts to describe the bizarre Celtic culture in Gaul (France) and the Druid religion. For more medieval references, turn to Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*. He describes a great deal of the military action of the Hundred Years War. I have used several of the specific details from the *Chronicles* in my writing. And another, for those with strong stomachs for reading medieval English (before they learned how to spell consistently), try the *History of the Arrival of Edward IV.* It takes a whyle to get the hang of the spelling, but ynce you realyze how much they lyked to yse the lettyr 'Y', it rylly starts

continued on next page

to flow.

And last but not least, I recommend a great modern military historian named John Keegan. His book *The Face of Battle* contains an exposé on the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. See the Kenneth Brangah film version of Shakespeare's *Henry V* if you can, but read Keegan's book to learn the true story. Again, he does a convincing job of sending his reader to the muddy battlefield of Agincourt, even though he's never fought in a war himself or traveled through time. And his ability to make it seem so real lends well to fantasy writers.

The Art of War: sort of...

I have been a fan of fight scenes my entire life. Whether it was Buck Rogers giving a round-house kick to an alien or the brilliant lightsaber duel in *Phantom Menace*, I have always enjoyed a good fight scene. Some prefer the quality of literary elegance to literary violence. But I'm not happy unless someone pulls a weapon at least once in a novel.

In my own writing, I have tried to use subtle details to make it more convincing. I have visited an archery range with a friend to get the feel for using a longbow. That experience alone gave me a dozen details to work with, not to mention having this friend offer tidbits to my scenes later on ("you wear a leather arm guard on your left so when the string snaps back, it doesn't leave a welt on your forearm," "you had the character rest on his bow, but a serious archer would rest the tip on his boot so as not to damage it," "you missed the bale again. Imagine if it was an Orc and charging you. You'd be dead." My reply, of course, was "I'm much better with a broadsword!").

Knowing the history of martial arts has also helped me as a writer. In the world of my novel *Landmoor*, there are people called Sleepwalkers who have studied a martial art similar to Shaolin Kung Fu. My elf-like race, the Shae, have special warriors called the Crimson Wolfsmen who have a reputation for skill in battle. Their martial art is more like hard, direct in-your-face style Hung Gar. In the world of *Tears of Minya*, the city spies are trained in a technique called Tah-Path, which I modeled after my semester of Aikido. It involves more grabbing techniques and flipping opponents onto the ground. And I used Talhoffer's book on German swordfighting for another novel series I've worked on called *Kingmakers* to make the combat more realistic. These are subtle elements that the majority of people might read past without noticing.

Which is why I decided to hit you over the head with it.

Learning these specific details can spice up a novel, a short story, or even spruce up a boring afternoon. It would not hurt to visit a *dojo* or a *kwoon* (a martial art school) and just watch. Sometimes they give introductory lessons for free. Every bit, every detail, will help make your writing a little more convincing.

Looks like it's time to close – here come some more Orcs.

Sources

Sword Forum
The Chronicles of Froissart
History of the Arrival of Edward IV
The Gallic Wars by Julius Caesar
The Art of War by Sun Tzu
Medieval Combat by Hans Talhoffer
The Face of Battle by John Keegan
Wing Lam's Kung Fu School
Jeff Wheeler's official website

The Lost Colony of Arob Arot

By A.M. Stickel

Resting on the golden sands by the shining ripples of the Singing River, let lovers and laborers remember…

Once there arose a ruler above, who was determined to seek the world's heart, where he was sure a great power lay hidden. He selected the palest among his people. Thinking they would not miss the sun, he sent them under Ganistan to mine beneath the mountains of Arob Arot, where they first built the city, Ib. He appointed a loyal, hardworking commoner as Underlord. The exiles followed the course of the Runsok as it plunged into the depths. The Runsok watered and powered Ib, even providing light enough for farming. Satisfied with its tribute of ore and gems, the Overlord left Ib alone.

The world of the ageless Overlord was filled with light and heat, and most of his people sickened from lack of it when sent to live and work away from it. But the hardier ones who thrived made a pact with the Underlord to find and keep the power from Ganistan's Overlord. To this end, the Underlord plotted to seal off Arob Arot, after first stealing the Overlord's youngest daughter, Kojanni, in order to establish his own legitimate royal line.

Because he had many sons, but no daughters, the Underlord's wives begged him to wait before marrying Kojanni. They wanted to enjoy and console her as if she were their daughter.

The custom of kidnapping a girl for a bride began with Kojanni's taking. Before that, parents would arrange marriages.

The Underlord emerged from Arob Arot when it was night in Ganistan. Having served there, he knew the palace well. He lured Kojanni, who loved birds, from her chambers out into the garden by imitating the night bird. She came forth to hear it better among the fragrant flowers. He snatched his beautiful prey before she could cry out, stuffed her in a sack, flung her across his back, and let her kick at him all the way to Ib. Then he sent his men to seal forever the way to the world above.

* * *

Kojanni despised the Underlord, for she had come from a very large family. Her father had fifty wives and over two hundred children. Being the youngest, she was used to many brothers and sisters spoiling her. She knew she was his favorite, since her doting father had bestowed upon her the name that means, "best beloved." Sweet as jasmine, her silky skin was very dark from living in the light and heat.

The Underlord, though robust from digging alongside his subjects and good-natured, was too old for her, too pale, and wore musty, dusty robes that made her sneeze. Besides, he had five wives already, although he had married late.

Because he had many sons, but no daughters, the Underlord's wives begged him to wait

continued on page 46

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

One request we frequently get here in the offices of Deep Magic is for recommendations on what else to read. I mean, let's face it, even when we provide you, our faithful readers, with an issue of nearly 200 pages of quality high fantasy and science fiction, that's still not enough. We would have to produce a weekly e-zine in order to meet many of our readers' needs for quality fiction.

To help meet that need, Deep Magic is proud to present a monthly book review column in which we'll tantalize you with discussions of quality (and sometimes not-so-quality) books.

To help you make informed decisions on what to read, we've included with our reviews two handy features. First, each review will rate the book or series on a scale of one to five. In keeping with our Lamp Post Awards, we've chosen the lamp post as our rating icon. Five lamp posts means a book that every library should have. One lamp post means a book whose sole merit is it makes a good shimmy to keep your desk level. Second, in keeping with our motto of 'safe places for minds to wander,' at the end of each review, we are including a brief synopsis of areas that some might find objectionable. These two features inter-relate only insofar as too much objectionable material quite often reflects a book that is more concerned with sensationalism than with telling a good story.

So, enough of this, let's dive into the books!

Editor's Choice: Fantasy
The Queen's Necklace
By Teresa Edgerton

In her latest book, *The Queen's Necklace*, Teresa Edgerton takes us back to the world of *Goblin Moon* and *The Gnome's Engine*. This time we're about 1500 years after the Maglore Empire has been overthrown. Mankind has been thriving and hasn't been treating the goblins too badly, although it's believed that the Maglores, the human-looking goblins, have been all exterminated. Rules have been established to prevent an empire from being created; also, goblin artifacts are being used to help each of the small nations maintain autonomy.

However, the goblin machines are disappearing slowly. In the country of Mountfalcon, Queen Dionee has unwittingly lost her country's artifact, the Chaos Machine, which keeps the mines running. Without the Chaos Machine, the mines will fail and landlocked Mountfalcon will be at the mercy of her neighbors, who will be able to declare whatever prices they want. To avert this catastrophe, Captain of the Queen's Guard, Wilrowan Blackheart, is commissioned to find the Chaos Machine. He slowly realizes that there is more going on than just one missing artifact. It seems that there's a massive conspiracy to restore the goblins to power and to bring the human world to destruction.

The story is split into three main narrative threads that are separated in time: one in the 'present' and two at various points in the near past. The two 'past' plot lines eventually meet up in time with the present plot line for a stirring conclusion. At first it is a little difficult to keep the story lines straight, but as the novel progresses, the time differences become clearer.

Wilrowan Blackheart is a compelling character in a book full of compelling characters. He married young, being tricked into marriage. He and his wife are friends, but not close, as husband and wife should be. Likewise, Will lives a carefree life. But the events in the book come to bear upon him and his lifestyle, and he has to make decisions about how he's going to live and has to come to realize the ramifications of his actions.

Beside Will, there are many other fascinating and well-realized characters: Will's wife Lili; Lucius Sacville-Guilian, cousin of the king of northern Winterscar; Tremeur Brouillard, mistress of the mad king of Rijxland;

continued on next page

Raith, tutor of the princes and princesses of Rijxland; and a man with a dark secret in his past.

The writing is quite strong, as one would expect from an author who has been writing for a good many years. The only glaringly weak point of Ms. Edgerton's prose was that there were a few too many "as you know, Bob" expositions: sections where characters explain what they already know to a character who already knows it, all for the sake of the reader, who hasn't been informed yet. However, that is only one weakness in an otherwise fun and adventuresome novel.

Possible objectionable material: mild sexuality.

(Reviewed by Matthew Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Anvil of the World

By Kage Baker

Kage Baker has, in the past decade, built a strong reputation for clever, humorous science fantasy with her Company stories about a race of cyborgs from the future who are using history to their profit. With her latest book, however, Ms. Baker turns to secondary-world fantasy. *The Anvil of the World* tells the story of Smith (not his real name), an assassin -- and a very effective one at that -- who is trying to retire and live a more normal life. The book is divided into three novellas, the first of which was published a couple years ago in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* as "The Caravan of Troon."

In Smith's world there are two main sentient races. Smith's race is known as The Children of The Sun and is a proponent of civilization, warts and all. The Children of The Sun develop great technology and wonderful arts, but also destroy the world in which they live. The other race, the Yendri (known to the Children of the Sun as 'greenies' because of their skin color), lives more in conjunction with the environment, but that seems to be all they do: exist. Because of these quite different philosophies, the two races are in constant and continual tension with each other. And all Smith wants to do is retire peacefully.

One of the first things he does after giving up assassination is become a caravan master for the train-like vehicles that make their way across the continent. However, on his first trip out, his passengers include the son of the major demon lord of the continent, as well as some folks that don't want him to live. Smith somehow manages to get most of his cargo, crew, and passengers to their destination where he decides to change occupations and become a hotel clerk, but things *still* don't go well as race tensions build. Finally, Smith is 'kidnapped' by a friend and forcibly taken to help recover an ancient religious artifact that will stop the race wars once and for all.

Ms. Baker's sense of humor is in full play here. There were moments when I found myself laughing out loud at some of the silliness. But this book is also a serious look at how we live in our environment. It doesn't come down on one side of the fence or the other, however.

Drawing fully formed characters is also one of Ms. Baker's strengths. By the end of the book both Smith and Lord Ermenwyr (the demon lord's son), the two main characters, are quite real. Lord Ermenwyr starts out as a farce, but it doesn't take long to realize that there is more beneath the surface than what he lets on. Smith, from beginning to end, is a strong character who only gets stronger as he goes.

Surrounding these two is a cast of characters that are memorable. In the first novella, they are caricatures intended to move the story forward, but in the second novella, they begin to take on flesh, and by the end of the third, they are fully realized. There's Burnbright, the messenger; Mrs. Smith (no relation: Smith's a common name in this world), the baker; Balnshik, Ermenwyr's demon nurse; and Willowspear, Ermenwyr's doctor. Just as memorable are many of the lesser characters: Eyrdway, Ermenwyr's morally stunted brother; Crossbrace, the corrupt public official; the porters Crucible, Pinion, Old Smith, Bellows, and New Smith; and the demon attendants Cutt, Crish, Stabb, and Strangel.

The major downside to the book is that there is a lot of sexual innuendo that can become distracting to some. But if you can get beyond the constant juvenile

continued on next page

banter of Ermenwyr (and later, Eyrdway), this is quite an enjoyable book.

Possible objectionable material: excessive sexual innuendo.

(Reviewed by Matthew Winslow)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Crown of Slaves
By David Weber & Eric Flint

Normally, I like to do a brief synopsis of a book before I give my opinion about it. However, Crown of Slaves is far too complex for a *brief* synopsis.

It is the first book of a new series in the Honor Harrington Universe, which makes it the eleventh novel set in that Universe. It is not necessary to have read Weber's previous works to understand what is going on in *Crown of Slaves*, but doing so might give a reader insight into subtleties that I was unable to catch as a first time Weber reader.

Weber and Flint combine politics, intrigue and tangled personal relationships into a very complex plot line. Within the first hundred pages of the book, the writers introduce around thirty characters, and that's not even counting the different political parties, planetary and local government agencies, military, and business entities. I finally had to map them all out just to keep them straight.

In spite of the story's complexity, Weber and Flint do a fabulous job developing a collection of strong and diverse characters. They have a knack for expressing a great deal about each character in just a few lines. Even those characters that receive relatively little time are sufficiently developed for the reader to understand each character's motivations and importance to the plot line.

One of the main political issues in *Crown of Slaves* is that of what to do about biogenetically engineered slaves. The morality of slavery isn't belabored, but it does play a key role in the opinions and politics of the books characters.

I found the book challenging to read but interesting and somewhat thought provoking.

Possibly objectionable material: Some sexual content, strong language and violence. If this were a movie, it would probably receive a PG-13 rating.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Book Review: Science Fiction
There Will Be Dragons
By John Ringo

There Will Be Dragons is set in a futuristic Earth (Terra) where mankind's problems have been eliminated. Diseases are gone and people have total control over genetics. DNA can be altered so that people can be the shape of anything they desire -- unicorns, whales, dragons, anything. An inhabitant of Terra can live for hundreds of years in total leisure, completely free to pursue his or her hobbies and interests.

The Terrestrial Council for Information Strategy and Management notes that birthrates are declining. At the current rates, humans in any form will be extinct in only five generations. Council members theorize that the high quality of life leads to decreasing birthrates. A dispute between council members on this issue quickly turns into a war.

The Council controls all power on Terra and instantly diverts it to the war. This leaves Terra's population completely without the foundation on which they have built their lives.

With the council at war and no power available, it is up to hobbyists who have made a study of pre-industrial Earth societies to save as much of the population as possible. They begin organizing and preparing their communities for an influx of people who will need food and have to learn to work for the first time in their

continued on next page

lives.

This is another work from Ringo that combines military, survivalist themes with science fiction. It is obvious that he has a very good understanding of and love for these subjects. The style of writing is smooth and very easy to read.

However, on the whole, I was disappointed with this book. While the setting is completely different from his previous works, the characters are too similar. I thought the female characters poorly written. The story, which may be interesting to those who enjoy a military/survival yarn, seemed unimaginative and predictable, with an ending that was obvious from a mile off. For those who come away from this story feeling unfulfilled, they can rest assured that there will be a sequel.

Possible objectionable material: Sexuality, sexual content, rape, violence and some strong language.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
DEEPER MAGIC
THE FIRST COLLECTION
Coming in December

The Geek's Guide to Grammar
That vs. Which

RULE: When introducing a restrictive clause, 'That' should be used. When introducing a nonrestrictive clause, 'Which' should be used.

First, a quick definition. A restrictive clause limits the definition of the subject. In other words, it further identifies the subject. `The sword that gleams like gold… (as opposed to one of the other swords)` A nonrestrictive clause gives incidental, additional information about the subject, but it doesn't define it. `The sword, which was made not long ago, was taken by the hilt and…`

This is a common issue in writing. Though current writing often ignores this rule, it is best to abide it to avoid ambiguity. Consider the following sentence: `The fire-breathing Dragon which had earlier terrorized the village was defeated by the White Knight.` So is there a mistake there? Let's check it out. The sentence could be meant to read one of two ways:

`The fire-breathing Dragon, which had earlier terrorized the village, was defeated by the White Knight.` or

`The fire-breathing Dragon that had earlier terrorized the village was defeated by the White Knight.`

So what's the difference? Here is a breakdown:

1. Using "Which": There is only one dragon (at least that we know of). The knight killed this dragon. Oh, and by the way, this dragon happened to burn down the village earlier.
2. Using "That": There are (could be) many dragons. However, the dragon that burned down the village is the one the knight killed.

In the second example, the fact that the dragon burned down the village is extra information not really needed to identify the dragon. In the first example, though, the 'burned down the village' info is necessary (at least implied to be necessary) to identify which dragon the knight actually killed

So the quick and easy? Clauses (nonrestrictive) introduced with 'Which' should be set off by commas. Those (restrictive) introduced with 'That' should not be set off by commas. That may be oversimplified a bit, but you generally can't go wrong if you stick to that rule. If it helps avoid an ambiguous statement, it can't be a bad thing!

Now tell me, did I confuse you even more? Let me know in the Geek's Grammar forum and we'll discuss it some more.

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

Exception:

When the subject is a person, you should use 'who' in place of 'that' or 'which.' If used to introduce a nonrestrictive clause, the clause should be set off by commas, as done with 'which.' If 'who' introduces a restrictive clause, do not use commas, as done with 'that.' `The knight who killed the dragon feasted with the King.` or `The knight, who was from a distant land, feasted with the King.`

Artist Profile
Steve Missal

Artist Website: http://www.onlytwin.com

Titles:

Top Left: *Curwen Screams*
Right: *Curwen's Journeys*
Bottom Left: *The End of Edward Hutchingson*

Magic Bullet

By T. P. Keating

With careful nonchalance she reached inside her silk blouse, but her furtive glance in my direction gave me all the information I needed. I'd played this scene out often enough. I stretched down for the dagger tucked into my worn boot. Too late. She already had a GUN pointed at my dense head. A GUN being a Granter of Unreasonable Necromancy, which can fire a magic bullet at you with disturbing accuracy and effect. Believe me, I'd seen the result once too often. Why hadn't I put my dagger within easy reach, instead of taking a slug from the bottle? Or packed some heat of my own when I had a chance? Drink would be the death of me yet. I made a face.

"Something hurting?" she enquired, with a deep voice. It felt like a large bucket of ice-cubes being tipped down my back. Just like last night. "I need you, Ivan Young," she added, tossing back her long red curls. A dame with more dangerous curves than a mountain highway, she'd positively slunk into my office, and each time the neon sign outside my window flashed off I regretted it. The fierce look from her green eyes hit me like a vicious punch in a bar brawl. Definitely like last night, in fact. I winced at the memory and put down my glass. If I didn't grab hold of the wheel soon, I'd be crashing through the barrier and plummeting to my death in the valley below.

The fierce look from her green eyes hit me like a vicious punch in a bar brawl. Definitely like last night, in fact.

Sure, I could see the joke. Because usually my rat-hole of an office itself felt like the bottom of a steep valley, as every low-life in town ended up rolling through my door. But this exquisite pebble was something else altogether.

However, business is business when a guy's got to eat. Or in my case, drink. Yeah, and who said I was perfect either? New York City is the kinda place where you can forget your past, or for the price of a better spell, forget your present and future. Who wouldn't need a drink? It's cheaper than a spell, and you might even forget for a moment that magic exists. Although having a GUN drawn on you didn't exactly induce a relaxed mood.

"Then I need you," I said, "to tell me what happened. Slow as you like, you never know which details may be vital." Also, I could live with her vital details lingering in my office for quite a while yet, GUN or no GUN.

"Sure, here's the deal. There's a body at the City Scroll Office and I want you to investigate."

"Lady, I'm flattered you should ask. But if you know me, you'll also know that I'll never set foot in that hell-hole again."

"It's common knowledge. You survived a freak magic accident there." My legs ached in sympathy. Then my heart ached. Love? Give me magic any day.

"Yeah, in my book the words magic and freak are interchangeable. Close the door quietly on the way out." To emphasize my point I looked down and shuffled some old papers (mostly bills) on my desk.

"Six chambers, one bullet," she said, followed by a nasty laugh. But when the odds were

continued on page 49

continued from Issue 17

The Rise

By Sarah Dobbs

PART FOUR
ONE

Four seasons later

Ry-anne combed her hair. She did not approve of using beauty spells as other girls did, but she did encourage her wild hair smooth with a mix of water and cider tree gum. It smelled nice, too, although she still reached for the scent and dabbed spots of moongrass musk on each pulse point.

This eve, she wore her hair down. Ending just shy of her waist, it flowed in soft chocolate waves and gleamed a fiery red when it caught the light. Ordinarily, the length of it made her curse and scrape it back. But this eve was special…maybe. Hooking stray strands behind her ears, she examined her reflection. She was ready.

She jumped up and grabbed him. "Markooth! Don't leave––just tell me what went wrong!"

Her eyes, dark as soil at midnight, wandered over a lower than usual white robe and the swell of her breasts--that she hoped might grow more still--and asked questions. Are you ready for this? Is Markooth? Her stomach flip-flopped delightfully as she thought of him. She had sensed him taking an unusual time over bathing and watched him through her mind's eye as he brushed and polished his brown thigh boots until they gleamed. And now, after pulling on his newest knee-length robe, he was on his way.

As he neared the door to the East Wing, she felt his nerves wriggle through her own stomach. They both knew what might happen this eve after the jig at New Pantherea. Ry-anne had just turned seventeen--the age the House officially allowed mental love-making. And Markooth never would break the rules, no matter how much Ry-anne tried to tempt him.

Taking a deep breath, Ry-anne dabbed on one last spot of musk for luck--right between her small breasts. She smiled and yanked back the door, running straight into Gaminem who carried Jenn and Helene's three seasoner, Kayina, with some difficulty. The babby was getting heavy and becoming more and more like Kyna with each passing Period.

"Oh darling--you look special!"

Ry-anne glanced away from Kayina, whose small fingers were in her mouth and whose eyes gazed upon the ceiling with wonder. "Oh mother, don't fuss. It's just dancing."

"Just dancing?" Mammy had a twinkle in her eye.

Ugh! She did not want to think that Gamine thought about what *she* thought about. Shrugging, she mumbled an unintelligible reply and rushed down the steps to collect Markooth before her mother had the chance to make them both feel awkward.

It was surprise that came into Markooth's mind when he first saw her. *You're beautiful,* he

continued on page 53

continued from Issue 17

Procyx Book Three

By O.R. Savage

Chapter Five
Lost Masters

I

Sentegor sat up abruptly, listening. All around him he heard only the sounds of his sleeping men. Petravor lay next to him, his depolarizer buzzing and glowing a dull violet along its discharge ports and veins. Beyond that, and the soft, lulling sounds of the deep forest, there was nothing. He listened intently for the voice he had heard in his sleep. High above him, the peaks of Markeeome hid amidst heavy clouds tinged gold from a moon lost from view behind the great mountain.

"What is it?" Petravor's voice came softly to him. The large man sat upright with unnatural silence and was looking around him for signs of trouble.

"Just a dream," Sentegor said after a moment. "Sorry I woke you."

Petravor gazed at him in the darkness for a long time.

"What is it?" Sentegor said finally.

"*You* do not have 'just a dream.' What was it?"

The boy prophet shook his head for a moment. "I saw something," he pointed skyward. "Up there."

"What?"

"Dark ships, dropping from the stars—silent; powerful; evil."

"The impossible never seems too hard when someone else has to do it," he said shakily. After a moment, Melana took her hand away.

Petravor looked upward. The sky displayed the old stars of the galaxy, mere smudges among the new Procyx-like stars that had only recently begun to appear, sewn each night a little further from The EndStar of Grief. While their colors extended across the spectrum, all were pure, coherent hues like Procyx itself. They looked almost gaudy, shining angrily among scattered clouds.

"It was only a dream, I tell you."

"That may be," Petravor stood up silently. "But I will watch." Then, after a moment of him studying the boy's face, he asked more. "Was that all?"

"That was all. Nothing more," Sentegor lied. Best let everyone here get as much rest as they could for what was coming. After a moment, however, he thought better of it. "Well, something . . ."

"I thought so. What was it? Tell me everything."

continued on page 89

continued from page 13

As he followed the man, the gray light and rain gave way to sunshine and the wet ground to a leaf-carpeted trail. The man continued calling out that name, but his voice had changed. The sadness had been replaced by hope. The Storyteller's fingers unconsciously reached for the book within his satchel, but he stopped himself. He must continue to watch, to see, or he would miss every detail. He would have time enough later to scribble down the myriad of thoughts scurrying through his mind.

He looked up as he passed beneath the arching boughs of two trees. They seemed to form a kind of doorway. As he exited the tree arch, the forest disappeared as if it had never been, replaced by an open field brimming with yellow flowers, surrounded by more trees. A woman, dressed in an amethyst peasant dress and wearing a matching headscarf, bent over the now-distraught man, on his knees, sobbing near the edge of the clearing.

He was still calling that name, his voice even more broken than before. Then, the Storyteller realized that the man was sobbing because he had not found the person to whom that name belonged.

Another woman came to take the man away through a heavy, iron gate set into a stone wall that formed one side of the field. The woman in the violet dress came toward him, hand steady on the scabbard at her belt. The Storyteller saw the long rapier in that scabbard and the anger in her eyes.

"Who are you and what is your business here?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to glare at him. The hoop earrings swinging from her ears tinkled lightly, sounding like fairy bells. "You do not belong."

"I am a Storyteller."

That lone statement swept the anger away from her face like an ebbing tide. Her hand moved away from her scabbard. "A Storyteller? We have not had a Storyteller come to us since… in a long time." She shook her head and corrected herself, but she could not hide the faraway look in her eyes, the look of remembering a distant and painful memory. "We are told that they are always too frightened to enter the wood." She turned away from him. "But you are different?"

"I have been told so by many."

She motioned to the stone wall. "Then, you are welcome to enter The Garden of Lost Dreams, Storyteller." She began to walk toward the gate, and he could do nothing but follow.

* * *

The garden was a melancholy, yet peaceful place. It was impressive, perhaps the size of an average town. Cottages dotted the blooming landscape of roses, wildflowers, bushes, and butterflies. The calming sound of running water pervaded as well, and he saw that in the middle of the garden was a small stream, a picturesque bridge arcing over it. People of all races milled about, some sitting on benches, writing, or just staring into space, others standing and talking to one another, their voices hushed.

The Storyteller turned to his guide. "It is a very beautiful garden, my lady."

She smiled at him, a sad smile. Everything about her seemed sorrowful. The look in her eyes, the expression of her face, even her stance. Her brightly colored clothing and the music of her jewelry when she walked did nothing to dispel the despairing air that surrounded her.

"But you can feel it, the sadness?" she asked.

"That is one of my questions. Why is such a serene place called The Garden of Lost Dreams?"

She sat down on a nearby whitewashed bench. "The people who come here are looking for lost loved ones. But those loved ones are not here. And so, the people finally realize that their loved ones are gone. They stay here because of the garden's comforting presence. You do not feel the comfort because you have not lost a loved one. This is a place where dreams are lost. And thus, the name." Her voice trailed into silence for a few moments before she asked, looking him squarely in the eyes, "Will you tell the story about us?"

He walked to a butterfly tilting on a long-stemmed flower and was surprised when it did not fly away at his disturbance. He studied it carefully, its array of blue and purple coloring dazzling him. He touched the butterfly's feet and it fluttered onto his finger. He turned to the lady of the garden. "Only if you wish me to."

She stood. "The garden is accessible only once a month during the new moon. The wood of Tristus is the portal to this garden. Tomorrow, that portal will close. Are you willing to stay for one month until the portal is open again?"

"I am willing. A story cannot be learned in one day." He lifted his hand and the butterfly left his finger for the freedom of the open sky. He glanced over at his guide and saw her watching the butterfly as it winged its way higher and higher. She looked regretful, envious, and trapped, all at the same time. The innkeeper had said that none ever returned. Was there any way for this woman to be free? Judging from her olive complexion and tamed curls of dark hair, she was of the race of gypsies, known for their inherent wanderlust, their love of the land on which they traveled. For her to be trapped in this garden must be torture.

It was difficult for her to tear her gaze away from the butterfly, but when she set her gaze on him again she nodded in approval of his statement.

"You are wise, Storyteller. I know now why you were chosen to tell our story."

* * *

He had learned the story of every single person in the garden. His book was full of scribbled notes, of facts and details he must memorize in order to tell the story to those at his next destination. It had taken him two weeks to speak to all the garden's lonely inhabitants, who were glad for a listening ear. The idea of their story being told to the entire land of Athera heartened many of them.

"To think that my daughter has been immortalized in a story," one woman had said with tears in her eyes. "I am sure now that she will never be forgotten."

The Storyteller could not help feeling sorry for these people. They had nothing left, only dreams and memories. They were a close group because of their similar losses, but friendship could never take the place of a lost loved one.

He sat on the bank of the stream at the center of the garden village, flipping through his small leather-bound book.

There were so many names and lives within these pages. He had even spoken to the man who had led him to this place. Corin had lost his wife when he nearly lost his ship during a vicious storm off the coast of Halcyon. He had left everything to find her, hoping that she had somehow survived the fall overboard and swam to shore, but he had found a place of peace instead. The Storyteller suspected that Corin would return to his beloved ship once he had finished his time of grieving. He reached the last few pages of his book, touching the aging white paper fondly.

Five pages were still empty. Five pages that he intentionally left blank for his guide's

story. He hoped that they would be enough. She had introduced him to those in the garden, but they had barely had a conversation since he first entered the garden. A soft step behind him told that she had come to him of her own accord. He knew that her story would be difficult for her to tell.

He closed his book and raised his head, looking across the stream, feeling the familiar weight as he remembered. The memories of his sister were ones that he kept locked behind a wall in his mind. He closed his eyes, seeing the merry smile and hearing the bubbling laughter of a girl just beginning to love life.

"My lady, you were wrong when you said that I have not lost a loved one."

He felt her sit down next to him on the grass. "I am sorry for my assumption. I was wrong when I said that you do not belong."

He opened his eyes and turned to her, letting the gentle sound of running water calm him. "My sister. She was my sister."

She remained silent, waiting for him to continue, knowing that the grieved needed no questions, only someone willing to hear and to understand.

"I was in the first year of my training as a Storyteller when she died. I almost gave up on my training, but her voice always came back to me. 'Tell me a story, brother. Tell me a story that will give me wonderful dreams.' And I always did. I knew that she would want me to continue, to become a Storyteller. She wanted to travel with me, to help me, to keep the loneliness away that comes with being a Storyteller. One of her beloved horses threw her to the ground. There was a hunting party nearby and the sound of the gunshots had spooked the horse. It was a needless death. My family almost fell apart because of it."

His story tasted bitter in his mouth. He hated every word, hearing how stilted and pained he sounded. He glanced over at the lady of the garden to see that there were tears in her eyes.

"You miss her greatly. She would be proud of the person that you are now," she said. How could she know that her statement was exactly what he needed to hear? He performed his duty because of his sister, to honor her memory.

"You have told me your story, and now I must tell you my own. It is only fair." She set her hands in her lap, a prim posture, but he could tell that she was steeling herself against the memories sure to come upon her.

And when she spoke, he realized what she was. Her voice was well-trained, and her emotions were clear.

"I am a Storyteller," she began. "I come from the land of Noctura, seeking the stories that have never been told. I came to this garden, having heard of its legend from the priests of Caelum. And I was trapped by a betrayer, a fellow Storyteller, the garden's protector, who knew of the curse on this garden and who saw my naiveté. I fell in love with this Storyteller; I played right into his hands. He told me that he loved me, that we would live in the garden, that we would protect the garden together. But it was all a lie. He left me one night, left the garden when the portal was open. I found only a note and this sword the next morning." Her hand unconsciously drifted to the scabbard at her side. "In the note, he told me that the Garden of Lost Dreams must always have a Storyteller to guard it, lest the garden and all its inhabitants vanish, never to be seen again. He told me that I must stay, or the blood of hundreds of people would be on my head. And so I have until this day."

"You do not belong here."

She studied him thoughtfully. "No, I do not. But I am willing to stay for these people. They are comforted by my stories." She motioned to the whole garden with an elegant sweep of her

hand.

"You are also a Storyteller. And every Storyteller has a name." He smiled at her. "My name is Tibris. I come from Sosii."

She nodded. "The land of the writers. It is understandable why you are a Storyteller. My name is Floresa of Noctura."

They sat in silence for a few moments before the Storyteller came to a decision. So there was a way for her to leave the garden. It would mean a sacrifice. His own. "I will take your place so that you may be free."

Floresa leaped up, her expression bitterly angry, the first sign of strong emotion the Storyteller had seen from her in the past two weeks. "You do not know what you are saying, Tibris of Sosii! I cannot allow you to take my place. It is too much like what *he* did to me."

"It is my decision to make, but for your peace of mind, I will ponder it longer."

She glared at him. "You cannot make me leave. You are destined for greater things than to be the Storyteller for a garden."

"And how do you know this?"

The glaring look faded from her eyes, replaced by the now-familiar sorrow. "Because you are different, Tibris. Different from any Storyteller I have ever met. And you cannot stay here, for you would die from it." Her next words were a whisper on the wind. "As I have."

Her words shocked the Storyteller and he realized that he had much to think about. "I will come to you in two days' time with my decision."

* * *

The Storyteller found himself wandering over to the wilder area of the garden, where flowers almost covered the stone paths with their uninhibited growth. He found this area comforting because it reminded him of the land outside the garden, where the woods were his home. A small rabbit peeked up at him from a nearby bush, nose twitching. Sensing no danger from him, it disappeared back into the brush. Wishing the rabbit had stayed to keep him company, he sat down underneath a nearby tree, surprised.

"I'm homesick," he said to the air.

He did not understand why it should be so. Here he had the companionship of others who had suffered as he had, a perfect little world where there were no duties, no responsibilities, only day after day of routine tasks, of doing whatever came into your mind to do. Here he would be free to write; here he would have a willing audience, people who would not criticize him.

He pulled out his book, flipping through the pages again, eyeing each word, measuring it, weighing it, placing it within the outline that was already in his head.

His mentor's words flooded back to him. Jodan exhibited a strict air, but the Storyteller could always tell that Jodan loved the students that he trained.

"You are different, Tibris. You have a great compassion within you, the desire to help others, and the wanderlust that befits a Storyteller. You will be one of the greatest among Storytellers; few will know your real name."

The Storyteller, at first, believed him, and he worked to be one of those greatest. But now, he wondered if he even wanted to be the greatest. Did he want to be known simply as the Storyteller, to be always lonely, always burdened with the stories of others? The Storytellers of legend had no names in history books; they were known only by their home village. He would become the Storyteller of Tydus, forever.

The creak of disturbed branches caught his attention and a woman stepped out of the wildest part of the wood, hands brushing leaves and twigs from her flame-colored hair streaked with strands of smoke. She straightened the skirt of her dress and looked up, deep green eyes scanning his in surprise. He also saw the hope that lit her eyes upon seeing him. She stepped forward as he stood to greet her.

"You are the Storyteller."

He bowed slightly. "Yes, I am. And may I ask your name?"

She smiled at him and he realized that she was older than he had first thought. Only someone who had lost much could smile the way she did.

"My name is Sola, young Storyteller. And I believe that you have not yet heard my story." She sat down underneath the tree where he had just been reclining and patted the ground next to her.

"No, I have not, but I would be glad to listen." He accepted her unsaid invitation.

"And take notes, I hope?"

The Storyteller had to laugh. This woman was a breath of fresh air after the melancholy atmosphere of the garden village. "Yes, my lady. And take notes." He pulled his book and a pen out of his satchel with a dramatic sweep of his hand.

She patted his arm in a motherly fashion. "You remind me of him, except you're a little more docile."

He paused in his scribbling of her name at the top of an empty page and glanced at her in surprise. "Of whom?" She was the first to describe him as docile. He hid a smile at her statement.

"My son, Kore. He went off to become a soldier a few days before I left." Sola turned to him, the words seeming to pour out of her. "My husband. I left him and I will always regret it. I knew it would hurt him deeply to return to an empty house, but I was lonely and angry at Bracken for always traveling. He knew I hated to travel. My family came to visit me here in Caelum and that is when I heard the rumor that Kore had died in battle. I was utterly distraught and would not believe."

"So you came here, hoping to find him," the Storyteller said.

"And he was not here. And I have not left since."

"You could have left any time you…"

She shook her head. "I do not wish to leave. It is peaceful here. Far from the world out there that took my son from me." She looked down at the ground. "And took my husband from me. He was a Storyteller, and always thinking of others. I often told him that he did not think of us enough. I still remember the look in his eyes when I said that to him. Betrayal, and then a sad acceptance."

"Do you still love him?"

Sola fidgeted, still looking down at the ground, for a few moments looking like a shy young girl. Finally, she raised her head and he saw the determination in her eyes.

"Yes." The determination faltered, her voice becoming hesitant. "Do you know of Bracken? Do you know where he is?"

The Storyteller nodded. "I may. I met someone at a town nearby."

She gripped his arm again. "Parsallus? He is there?"

"I believe the innkeeper may be your husband. He told me that he has been searching for his wife for the past ten years. He was afraid to enter the garden for fear that she would not be here and that he would not be able to leave to continue his search for her."

Sola looked at him in wonder. "He stopped being a Storyteller?" The tears finally came.

"Oh, Bracken, you gave up what you loved for me. I am so sorry…"

The Storyteller stood, wanting to leave her in peace. "My lady, I must know. If I bring him here, do you believe that he will want to stay?"

Sola nodded. "I believe he will." A look of understanding crossed her face. "You want to free her, don't you?"

"I do. She is trapped here. It is in her eyes."

"Ah, Storyteller, how much you remind me of Kore. He was always off saving some damsel in distress." She stood and patted him on the shoulder. "You are right about Floresa. We are good friends in spite of the difference in our ages. She does not belong here and the man who betrayed her should be imprisoned without the Light forever."

She surprised him with a hug and stepped back. "Now, go. I will be waiting for you to bring my Bracken to me. Take this necklace. He will recognize it." She handed him a delicate chain with a sparkling opal pendant. She smiled, a smile that was filled with hope and joy.

As the Storyteller walked away, heading back to the village, he thought of Floresa and the sad smiles that she always wore, so different from the fire in Sola's eyes.

Then, he knew what else it was he had seen in Floresa's eyes when he had first met her.

"She's homesick too," he said to the wind.

* * *

She was on the bridge, leaning against the wooden rail, a rose in her hand. When she saw him approach, she turned away from the rail expectantly. The Storyteller was sure that he looked far from happy, but that fact only told her what his decision was.

"You will not stay," she said as he joined her on the bridge.

"My book is full and I need another."

"A wise decision, Storyteller." She bowed to him extravagantly, her rapier sweeping out behind her. "I will miss your company."

"There is a way for you to leave the garden." He did not ask, already knowing what her answer would be.

"Only if another Storyteller appears who is willing to stay. And even the most talented Storyteller is not capable of such magic." She looked down at the stream, tossing rose petals into it and watching them float away.

But he had found that other Storyteller. He only hoped that Bracken would agree to return with him and to stay.

"How many days until the portal opens?"

She dusted off her hands and gave him a puzzled look. "Twelve days. You are suddenly anxious to leave?"

"I think I may have found your Storyteller."

She laughed at him. "Do not tease me, Tibris. You cannot just leave and drag a fellow Storyteller back here without his permission."

"Before I came to the garden, I spoke to the innkeeper in Parsallus. I think his wife may be here in the garden and that he is in Parsallus looking for her."

"I remember that man. He has been there for at least two years. Why did he not come to the garden himself?"

"Because he is afraid. Afraid that she will not be here and that he will not be able to leave to continue his search for her. He has probably been hoping for someone to return from the wood

and tell him that she is here."

"What is his wife's name?" There was some hope in her eyes, not much, but enough to encourage the Storyteller in his explanation.

"I met her only a few minutes ago and she told me her story. Her name is Sola."

* * *

The innkeeper was busily wiping off the reception desk when the Storyteller appeared in the doorway.

"Bracken?"

The innkeeper looked up, surprised. His eyes widened even more when he saw that it was the Storyteller. The Storyteller strode forward, placing his book on the newly cleaned desk.

"Your name is Bracken, right?"

The innkeeper nodded slowly. His mouth worked a bit before he actually spoke, his gaze on the book. Finally, he looked up. "I have not heard that name…for a very long time."

The Storyteller picked up the book and turned it to one page. "Start reading here. I believe that you will recognize the story."

Bracken suspiciously picked up the book. He began to read. The Storyteller watched the man, trying not to smile as tears began to fall from Bracken's eyes.

"She is alive," he whispered. "My Sola is alive. Oh, but Kore died in battle on the border of Bellator and Alatus. My heart was broken that day, and I could not know if Sola had heard and if she felt the same pain I felt. She left our home while I was traveling. Sola hated to travel, and she hated me for loving it so much. She blamed me for Kore's desire to go to war, blamed me for everything that went wrong. But I still loved her. I always will love her. For so long I did not know if she was dead or alive. But she is alive…"

The Storyteller put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Would you like to see her, Bracken?"

"She would speak to me?"

The Storyteller nodded. "She is sorry for what she has done, Bracken. She does still love you." He handed Bracken the necklace that Sola had given him.

Bracken smiled as he brushed at the tears on his cheeks, pressing the necklace to his chest. "I gave this necklace to her on our wedding day. And she has kept it all these years…." He kissed the pendant, picked up a bag from underneath the desk and stood, swinging the bag over his shoulder. "I have kept this packed for the last ten years, ready to go to her at a moment's notice. She is all I have left in the world."

"There is one question I have for you," The Storyteller said as they walked to the door. "Would you consider staying in the garden?"

Bracken called out to one of the other workers, saying that he was leaving and would not be coming back. The worker just nodded and smiled, as if expecting Bracken's statement. As they walked out of the inn, Bracken turned to the Storyteller and gave his answer.

"Son, if that is where Sola is, that is where I will stay."

Bracken trudged off, leaving the Storyteller to stare after him. He had never seen such commitment in a man. Would he ever love someone as Bracken did? But the life of a Storyteller was difficult and there were few women who would agree to such a life.

* * *

The Storyteller stood back and watched as husband and wife were reunited. There were many tears, many apologies. He could feel Floresa's gaze on him, feel the questions directed at him. *Did you ask him? Will he stay? Does he know of the curse?*

Bracken walked toward him and Floresa, his arm comfortably settled around Sola's shoulders. Sola's eyes were bright with joy, and for once the atmosphere in the garden was different, happy.

"Sola tells me that there is a curse on this garden."

The Storyteller glanced at Floresa. He was about to speak when Bracken interrupted him.

"No, it was not Floresa's doing. Sola overheard one of your conversations. She wishes to stay here in the garden. I now understand your question, Storyteller. It is like I told you. Where Sola is, I will stay." He smiled at Floresa. "You will be free to go, and I will be free to stay with my wife. We will be happy here. And I can tell my stories to these people. It has been too long since I have told a proper story."

The Storyteller wondered how happiness could stay in the Garden of Lost Dreams. Perhaps they would change the name.

Floresa looked ready to cry, but she held back the tears as she hugged Sola. "Thank you, my friend. You do not know what this means to me."

Sola pulled back slightly, the joy within her lighting her face. "You were forced to stay here, Floresa. You do not belong as we do. We can bring happiness to this garden, somehow."

"The portal will close soon. You must go," Bracken said. "You are welcome here whenever the portal is open. Perhaps you can bring us some new stories to tell."

Floresa stepped back from Sola and took off the belt at her waist. The scabbard dangled from it and the Storyteller could see the shine of the rapier's ornate hilt. Bracken bowed grandly and then took the belt from her. The weight lifted from Floresa's shoulders and she put aside all decorum to give Bracken a hug. The older man patted her on the back as he would a child. He gave her a fatherly smile and fastened the belt around his waist.

"All those who live in the garden live forever," Floresa said. "May your days be blessed and full of joy. And may the Creator of Light be with you always."

Floresa began to say goodbye to the others who lived in the garden, promising to return for a visit. The Storyteller remained in the background, watching. His duty was finished here and it was time to go.

"Floresa of Noctura, come, we must go." The Storyteller held out his hand to her.

The entire village came to see them off in the field of yellow flowers. The last thing he saw before the field disappeared from before him were the smiling faces and the waves of farewell. They stood now in the wood of Tristus, beneath the arch of the two trees. He let go of Floresa's hand.

"It has been two years since I have seen this wood. I never thought it would appear so welcome a sight." She smiled at him, breathing in deeply of the air. "It smells of freedom here."

"I am glad that I was able to help you find your freedom."

Floresa took his hand again. "I will never forget your kindness to me, Tibris."

* * *

"Where will you go?" Floresa asked, as they sat later at a luncheon table in a small boardinghouse. Their hostess watched them with something between awe and fright, for they had returned from the wood of Tristus. The first she had ever seen.

The Storyteller took a drink of water before answering, trying to gather his thoughts. "I will go to Halcyon and see what stories are there. And you?"

Floresa's eyes grew distant, the same expression he had seen when they first met in that field. "I will go to my home in Noctura. My family is there. They probably think me dead. I have not communicated with them in two years. But first, I will stay here for a few days. I need to reacquaint myself with the goings-on in Athera."

The Storyteller stood. "Perhaps we will meet again, Lady of the Garden." He bowed at the waist. The corners of her mouth turned up a little at the sound of his name for her.

"You will leave now?"

"There is no better time. I feel the call to Halcyon." He patted his satchel. "And I have enough provisions for three days' journey."

She nodded in understanding. "The life of a Storyteller is one of constant movement. It is a good life."

"May the Creator of Light be with you."

She stood and slid her hand into his, surprising him But he put his other hand over hers, realizing that he would miss her company. "And with you, Storyteller. I hope that we will meet again in our travels."

The Storyteller left her at the doorway to the boardinghouse, continuing on his journey, his full book tucked into his satchel. Somewhere along the way, he would need to buy another. As he thought of the freedom Floresa now had, he was glad that the story of the Garden of Lost Dreams would begin with "Once upon a time…"

The End

Lynn-Marie Braley lives in Washington, DC with her husband, Joshua, who is in the military. She has a bachelor's degree in mathematics and currently occupies her time with being a homemaker. Fantasy is a new writing outlet for her, and she hopes that she has done justice to the genre.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 16

My forearm had disappeared up to the elbow. The vanes of the dryer had become a blur. Heat engulfed my head and shoulders.

"Help!" I yelled. Before I could say another word, I was compressed and vacuumed into the lint trap.

I wonder if this is what it's like to be sucked into a black hole, I thought as I lost consciousness.

* * *

Head aching, I came to and observed two hawks circling lazily above me in a clear blue sky. The sun was a glowing cinder high above a ridge of familiar-looking, saw-toothed purple mountains. Before I had a chance to place them the birds drew closer, bald white heads flashing in the sun. They weren't hawks, I realized, but vultures. I tried to rise, but my hands and feet were staked to the ground with rawhide thongs.

The birds circled lower, and I saw their crimson eyes glaring at me. One flew over me, and its wing feathers grazed my body. The odor of decaying meat made me gag. They wheeled and glided back toward me, talons extended. I cringed and tried to make myself smaller. At the last moment, the lead vulture screamed and veered away. With a rapid beating of wings, both rose upward and flew off toward low hills.

I sighed, trembling at the last minute reprieve. Then I sobered and wondered what had scared them away.

I heard a crunch of stones and scuffle of dirt beside me. I twisted around, but saw only a dark, manlike shadow against the sun. The creature stepped out of the glare, moving with a curious, rolling gait to squat at my feet. It rocked back on its heels, its lipless mouth opened round like a leech, revealing jagged teeth circled inside the cavity. A long tongue flicked out, and it made a toneless whistling noise while staring at me.

I stared back, there not being much else I could do. My panic had evaporated. Maybe it was the reprieve from the vultures; maybe it was just the way these things go. Quantum mechanics and the theory of alternate universes floated through my mind. However, they never prepared me for anything like this. The Sci-fi Channel, on the other hand…

In all the TV shows and movies, whenever a human and a nonhuman come face to face, they stare at each other. So I studied it, studying me—in some kind of universal truth that extends beyond bad directing and worse acting—wondering if this is what an alternate universe is supposed look like. I mean, where do all those lost socks disappear to anyway?

It looked enough like a human to be classified a hominid. It was naked from the waist up, its skin mottled black and blue with yellowish rings in places, as though it had taken a severe beating. The large, bulbous head was covered with soft, feather-like scales that reflected the sun with a golden hue, long-lobed ears stuck out on either side; beneath heavily lidded scales dark irises with golden oval pupils stared at me, unblinking like a lizard's. Its nose had been squashed flat, and a fringe of tiny tentacles hung from either nostril.

Give it half a dozen earrings, a pierced nose and a cigarette, and it could have been my roommate, Drew.

The creature held a long knife in its left hand and clenched something in the other one. The fist unrolled suddenly in a flash of bright color.

I gasped as I recognized the variegated, diamond shaped patterns. I looked at my feet. My left was now bare, just like the right one.

I've always thought that the dim-witted remarks actors make when first meeting an alien species must provide insightful commentary on the human condition.

"Hey! That's my sock!" is what I said.

The creature threw back its head and brayed like a donkey. When it stopped, it took a long breath, filling huge lungs, and said in a deep male voice, "Not any more, pardner."

I was stunned. It was EnglishÐexecrable and heavily accented with a western drawl.

He stood and I saw that he had shoeless, horny, well-callused feet with a wicked looking spur on the heel. He wore heavy pants with several socks hanging like scalps from a thin cord around his waist.

He looked into the sky. "Buzzards'll return soon, I reckon. If not them, then scorpions, rattlers, or a mountain lion. Somethin's sure to git ya sooner or later." He nickered like a horse.

"Why?" I spluttered.

"Huh?"

"Why take my sock?" Yeah, another incredibly deft comment. I guess my excuse is that I'd never been sucked into an alternate universe before, and the proper protocols just plain escaped me.

He snorted and shook the argyle at me. "Can't have some heathen goin' around wearin' this beauty. It'd be wore out in no time."

"You don't have to tie me up to do that."

He scratched his head with a dirt-encrusted fingernail.

"A person who ain't got no respect for one of these ain't worth keepin' alive. Can't see how it'd hurt to let the desert take ya." He smiled. "'Sides, can't have you following me, mebbe get the jump on me and steal my claim." He lifted up the socks at his waist.

I counted twenty-seven of them, all mismatched. They ranged from gym socks to dress blacks. My argyle was the most colorful of the bunch. He shaded his eyes with a calloused hand, and I noted a tiny spur at the base of his palm.

He looked at the sun. "Couple more hours, reckon you'll be a nice baked treat for the coyotes."

I tried to twist against the stakes and thongs. Already the ground was uncomfortably warm. I didn't think I would last until afternoon.

He smiled again. "Adios." He turned to leave.

I shouted, "Wait! You haven't told me what this is all about." OK, so it wasn't exactly original, or anything dramatic. It was just that aside from the fact I was scared of snakes and scorpions in general, and coyotes feasting on my liver in particular, I discovered in my twisting that the stake holding my right arm was loose. I felt that with one good yank I could pull it from the ground. I wanted him to come a little bit closer, so that I could whack him and take his knife.

He turned with a quizzical expression, the golden scales above his eyes forming twin crescents. "Eh?"

"What's your name? Who are you? What is this place?"

He squatted again, and dug into the dirt under one of his fingernails with the point of the knife. "My handle's Marcel DuChamp. An' this here's Areezona."

Arizona, my home state. Those purple, sawtooth mountains suddenly made sense. They must be the Maricopas. Only, calculating how far away they were, I figured we should be in Tempe among brick and concrete buildings, surrounded by the clamor of traffic and people. The air was clean too—if by clean one means the absence of car exhaust.

"I'm from Arizona too," I said quickly. "The name's Joe Jackson. So what brings you into

the desert?"

He brayed again. "Boy, you're as dumb as a flat rock, an' twice as ugly. These, of course." He shook the belt of socks at me. "I'm a prospector."

"What's so special about a sock? I mean it's just a sock."

DuChamps drew back as if I had spit at him. He made the sign of an inverted cross, touching his forehead, genitals, and hips. "You're lookin' at a fortune. And this baby," he held up the argyle, "well, it's one in a million… With it alone I can retire in Fenix. Buy myself a bar and hire a Faro dealer. Then I won't have to trudge through these mountains anymore, thirsty all the time and dusty as a cactus chewin' burro."

The idea that socks could be priceless on this alternate world sounded silly to me, but then on my own earth impressionist paintings from the 19th century sell for hundreds of millions of dollars because a few silly rich people have too much money and too much time on their hands. So, if twenty-seven mismatched socks could set him up for life, I imagined what a drawer full of perfect pairs could do.

"Marcel, I've got fifty more socks like that one in a drawer in my house. Let me go and they're yours."

He stared at me, then rolled onto his back and kicked his feet in the air, all the while hee-hawing like a mule. While he laughed, I worked the stake back and forth a few times. At last, he settled once more on his haunches. "Joe, you must think I'm the dumbest rube in the county. Why that's the oldest dodge in the world. 'Come up to my place, I got a drawer full of socks.' If'n you had that many socks, I wouldn'a found you out here, lyin' face down in the desert with one sock on your foot."

That was the kind of ironic truth I couldn't argue with.

He leaned over me. His breath smelled like turpentine and fish guts. "You ain't from around here, an' it's just my good fortune an' your dumb luck that you run inta me." He honked loudly.

By then, I had loosened the stake. When he turned away, I hit him across the side of the head. He must have seen it coming because he half-lifted his arm to block, and I only stunned him. Still, he dropped the knife. I picked it up and slashed the thong on my left hand. He recovered, but I sat up and slammed the hilt against the back of his neck. He fell across my legs.

I shoved him off and cut myself free. I stood up and looked around. The country was steep rocky hills and washed out arroyos with sharp flakes of stone. Here and there saguaro cactus stood pinched and dusky green against the pale red ground and sere blue sky. Just like my Arizona, minus the smog. On my world, Phoenix lay west of here. I squinted against the lowering sun. Maybe the shadows in the distant haze were buildings. If I started now and walked steadily . . . my feet would be cut to ribbons within half a mile and I would bleed to death quickly thereafter.

I looked at Marcel's calloused feet. They were like hooves with four vestigial toes, a larger toe and, of course, the spur. Some birds had spurs like this—the ostrich. It could rip open a man's belly in an instant. *Maybe in this universe humans evolved from birds*, I thought, *and didn't need shoes.*

I eyed the creature's pants. They were the tough leather of some animal. I took them off. He was definitely a male. Using his knife, I swiftly cut out crude moccasins. Shoes and socks—if I ever figured how to transport between this world and mine, I could become a wealthy art dealer. I recovered my argyle, and took the rest of his socks as well. Who knew what I might need to buy?

The sun had become a blister of light nearly resting on the mountains, and it was sinking quickly. I took off at a slow trot, putting as much distance as possible between me and my would-be-ambusher. I moved at an even pace, checking behind me from time to time. Marcel wasn't anywhere I could see. As I ran, I began to relax and think about what had happened. According to Schroedinger, there are an infinite number of possibilities at any given point of time. Each of these is its own universe. Somehow the dryer had sucked me into a reality where socks were as precious as gold or diamonds. I suppose it was possible. After all, the proof stared me right in the face, and that got me to thinking along lines much grander than unified field theories.

On my Earth, Phoenix and Tempe formed a modern American city. Here, it was desert and Gila monsters. The air was clean and the water too, I suspected. A virgin world much like my Earth had been 200 years before I was born. I smiled. It wouldn't be too hard to live like a king here. A man with my knowledge and experience could go far in this world, developing inventions that hadn't been thought of yet.

The sun had not yet set when I saw it—a flash of color hanging from a saguaro cactus. At first I thought it might be the plant's fruit. But as I approached, I realized it was my other argyle.

I smiled and imagined what the residents of Fenix would think when they saw me walk into town wearing these two beauties. I'd be elected mayor for life, no doubt.

I leaned against a boulder and pulled off my moccasins, which chafed me, and put the argyles on. The wool was warm and fuzzy against my skin. I felt a tingling like an electrical build up during a thunderstorm begin at my feet. A nimbus of blue-white lightning swirled around my ankles and reached toward my knees. I swatted at it, but it shocked me—like skidding across a wool carpet on Christmas morning and touching the tinsel hanging from the tree. The lightning reached my waist. I felt a heavy pressure on my shoulders and chest, as though I was being compressed. Sparks reached my neck. I looked around. I seemed to have shrunk a great deal, because the boulder dwarfed me now. All at once I was flattened, and I blacked out.

* * *

"Mirror Mirror on the wall, why's ol' Joe lyin' in the hall?"

A dull glimmer of simian awareness passed through my brain. My eyes opened, and I saw Drew leaning over me, a cigarette dangling from his smirking lips.

"Man, you look worse than Van Gogh with his ear cut off."

I groaned.

"I feel like his ear after he cut it off."

He took a drag and leaned back against the dryer, letting the smoke trickle through his nose ring into the gray light of the laundry room. Behind him, the windows showed the twilight of evening. He chuckled and flicked ashes into the dryer.

"Your grandmother called," Drew said between puffs. "Wanted to know why you missed lunch."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Drew Champs don't wear a watch, Joe; you know that."

"Sure . . . Uh, what I meant is what day is it?"

"Friday."

I'd been gone a day and a half.

"So, what happened to the dryer?" he asked.

I craned my head around. The vanes were twisted. The dark smear of a short-circuit haloed the lint trap. Gone the interuniversal conduit. I looked down; my socks were gone and so were the ones at my waist. I managed a pang of regret for schemes and riches that might have been. I thought about how much of my trip I could tell. I decided the story was a bit too far-fetched, even for Drew, who saw everything through an impressionist haze of alcohol and drugs.

Finally, "It was the socks," I said. "Can't leave home with 'em, can't come home without 'em."

He nodded knowingly. "That's like the 11th commandment or something."

My turn to nod.

"Or something."

The End

From 1994-96 Mark Reeder was the lead writer for the radio talk show, "Against the Rush," listened to by tens of people across the country. Currently, he works for Centre Communications as a writer and researcher for their educational films.

"A quick note about this story. The first line in each section is derived from the title of a book or teleplay about alternate universes. In order: Lewis Carroll, "Alice through the Looking Glass;" Philip Jose Farmer, "Two Hawks from Earth;" and Star Trek's "Mirror Mirror.'" Marcel DuChamp was the originator of the Impressionistic School of painting. Finally, Joe Jackson is an homage to the famous ball player, 'Shoeless' Joe."

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 22

before marrying Kojanni. They wanted to enjoy and console her as if she were their daughter. He agreed to wait a little while to humor them, knowing he would get no peace if he did not. From long experience, he realized they would eventually rue their victory.

The Underlord's wives, charmed with dainty Kojanni, neglected their sons to play with her. When their sons came to them for this and that, they made excuses like: "Kojanni has such beautiful long black hair; I must comb and perfume it," or "Our girl has the largest and loveliest dark eyes, not all squinty and pale like yours," or "Our precious one is like honey because she is pure and perfect in every way, as we were before your father took us." On went the wistful wives, singing Kojanni's praises, reliving their girlhood through her, while their sons grew ever more jealous, especially since they had no royal blood. The only boy who was not jealous was the youngest, Orrub, Kojanni's companion and guide in Ib, because he wanted her for himself.

Orrub overheard his older brothers making plans. Said one, "First, we will steal her from our mothers; then I will cut off her long black hair and stuff it in a pillow for Father."

"I can do better than that; I will gouge out her eyes and serve them to him with those steamed fish eyes he craves," bragged another, drawing his finger along the sharp edge of his bejeweled fish knife.

"Let us deprive our father of her royal perfection," suggested the last, trying to outdo his brothers, "Eyeless, she would not know who took her. Then, when Father finds her not the flawless gem he had expected, and banishes her to dig with the lowest delvers, we will dispose of her in the Runsok."

Orrub was outraged by their mad raving, and went to his mother, the Underlord's youngest wife, telling her everything. But his mother's co-wives, who, of course, preferred their sons to him, confronted Orrub. "You are jealous of your brothers, and Kojanni too. They would be foolish to try anything. The Underlord is still mighty. None dare displease him. Now be off with you, little troublemaker."

* * *

Homesick Kojanni, worn out from too much attention, finally sought escape from it by throwing herself into the icy waters of the Runsok. Instead of drowning her, the tricky current swept her toward the rocky shore away from the city, where, hungry and cold, she would have died a slower death.

But Orrub had been spying on her as easily as he had on his brothers. Though a mere stripling, he was a capable swimmer, and dove in a little upstream from her, grabbed her by her long hair, and dragged her back to safety. "Listen to me, Kojanni," he said, wrapping the shivering girl in his cloak, "My brothers mean to do you great harm, even unto dishonor and death, for taking all of their mothers' attention and their father's love. Let me help you."

Her experience in the Runsok having convinced her that she wanted to live, Kojanni replied, "How do I know that it is not you who will betray me, Orrub?"

Said he, "I would never betray the one I love, respect, and saved just now. I have found a way to return you to Ganistan and your family. You must trust me completely, and come with me immediately."

Kojanni looked into his glowing eyes and believed Orrub. "Yes, I will go with you. I am tired of being a plaything for some, an object of hate for others, and a tool for the Underlord's royal aspirations."

Resourceful Orrub had everything ready nearby. First, he had Kojanni strap a sheathed

fish knife to one ankle and concentrated food sealed in a watertight skin to the other. Then he took her by the hand, and they made their way upward to the place where the Underlord's men had blocked off Arob Arot. "Dive here," he ordered, entering the water, at home again in his favorite element.

Not far below the water, the two could see the light from the outside world coming from a hole wide enough for youngsters to swim through, but not for adults. It was a tributary stream to the Runsok. The current, though less than the river's, forced them to grip rocks on either side. They propelled themselves through, and then kicked for the surface.

Orrub and Kojanni emerged from the water gasping for air. But, as she gazed upon him, shielding her eyes from the sudden brightness, his fair skin began to blister. He could not bear to even open his eyes in the blinding glare. His pale hair did not protect him. His strength failed him. She cut off her long dark hair with her fish knife, draped him with it, and helped him to the shelter of a shaded rock. He had been her strength in water and darkness; she was his salvation in light and heat. Out of necessity, Kojanni abandoned modesty. She removed her soaked garments and laid them over Orrub, saying, "Rest here, and eat what we have brought, while I go look over the ridge toward home to see if all is well. Something feels amiss, and not as I remember from before. For one thing, there are no birds flying above."

When she looked, the maiden beheld a terrible sight. Where once stood the Overlord's magnificent holdings, many times over the size of Ib, lay a vast wasteland, melted to slag. The evil aura that hung over the desolation also burned her eyes, so that her sight began to dim, even as she went to Orrub weeping. "Father must have been preparing to storm Arob Arot to free me from the Underlord. He often spoke about how his wise men would soon harness the energy of the sun to serve our people and widen his rule beyond Ganistan. The adepts were working in hopes of uniting their power with that hidden under Arob Arot. Instead, they've destroyed themselves. Nothing lives above ground. We must return to Ib before my vision fails, or else I will lose you too, Orrub."

He could have guided her at night, skirting the desolation, to find out if anything survived beyond Ganistan, but Kojanni was afraid for Orrub. She began to ache all over, and felt as if acid had been poured on her scalp. The poisonous perversion of the sun's powers that had caused her loss of family stole her beauty. She dragged Orrub to the stream and held him almost fully immersed, carefully keeping his eyes covered, until he seemed to revive. The water made her feel better as well. They dove together, hand in hand.

Following the current, they tumbled through, back inside Arob Arot, where the Underlord's men discovered them, and covered her. Where her lustrous eyes had been, Kojanni had only empty sockets. A few shriveled hairs clung to her burned scalp. Clutching the side of his litter, she held her head high, but kept herself veiled from Orrub, who could see again, as he was borne to his father's quarters.

The Underlord embraced his blistered son, saying, "Your mother came to me with the news of your brothers' treachery. We were sure that, after ruining Kojanni as they planned, they had bound and cast you both into the Runsok to vanish into the depths of Arob Arot beyond where even the deep delvers have gone."

Kojanni knelt humbly at the Underlord's feet, and kissed them. "Although I appear ruined, I remain undefiled. You are honor-bound to be my guardian now that Ganistan is utterly obliterated. I could have abandoned Orrub to the light and heat, but he loves me, and saved me, so I brought him home to you. We are the last of Ganistan, and I the last of her royal blood. We may even be the last of our race, lost forever in the darkness of Arob Arot…"

The girl raised her sightless, tearstained face to the Underlord. “Although, as the cause of this, I deserve to die, spare me for Orrub’s sake. And, if you value your people more than Father did his, I beg you, search not for the hidden power at our world’s heart.”

The Underlord, shocked by the sight of Kojanni and moved by her pleas, granted her request. He had already executed his evil sons, and punished his four faithless wives, although he later took them back when they repented and reformed. Orrub’s mother, elevated to chief wife, nursed Kojanni back to health, but kept her from Orrub. Her husband encouraged his son to learn how to govern his people, once the young man had recovered from his ordeal.

* * *

Soon Orrub, having achieved manhood and the fullness of his strength, stole to the women’s quarters and grabbed Kojanni while she slept beside his mother. He lowered himself over the rock-carved balcony, easily carrying his bride over his shoulder. She kicked and screamed because she thought, at first, that it was the Underlord again. When he kissed her eyelids and placed his hands upon her head, she was restored. Then, seeing that it was Orrub, who loved her and desired her sweetness, she laughed and kissed him for the first of many times. The Runsok sang them a wedding song, which goes:

They who live below have learned they are not really lost, and have no need to seek in the world’s heart the power they already hold in their own.

The End

A.M. Stickel lives in “Flower Land” near the Runsok, 3 miles below Deep End, contributes to DEEP MAGIC, NFG (Toronto print magazine), John Amen’s PEDESTAL, Colin Harvey’s SHOWCASE, and Andy Robertson’s NIGHT LANDS. The writer’s magic works include stories, poetry, and painting.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 29

that much in my favor I never trusted them. That's how I ended up going for a night-time stroll to the East Fifties with a not-so-beautiful pebble and a GUN dug into my back.

* * *

In a little spell-lit chamber, where even two would be a crowd, lay the body of a man. We crowded in.

He wore the uniform of a City Scroll Officer; a long silver robe, black pants and a black shirt. "Flip him over," she demanded. After carrying out Miss Obey-Me's order, my flip of several parts revealed a rodent-faced man.

"I know him," she stated, followed by, "No blood. No magic involved either."

"That's a relief," I deadpanned.

"Look!" She pointed to a small metal tripod, on which lay a piece of blue ribbon, a spilt silver goblet of red wine, and an unstoppered bottle. I sniffed very carefully at the bottle. "Jersey root," I announced, "all but tasteless and very fast acting. Was he a man likely to take his own life?"

"No. He was way too full of himself."

Sweetheart, you should know, I thought.

"Murder then. Sure, I knew him too. The Keeper of the City Scrolls. He made an enemy of just about everyone he spoke to." Apart from the people he deliberately sucked up to, that is. Not forgetting the working public at large, who simply adored bankrolling Scroll Office officials.

With great care, I examined every inch of the windowless chamber. Apart from the tripod, the only other item of furniture was a narrow metal bench along the wall furthest from the door. A sickly yellow glow-spell hovered in the center of the ceiling. It gave the air around it a cheap mustard smell. I swore under my breath. No chance of escape for me.

"A drinker?" I inquired.

"He enjoyed an occasional drop, though no more than average. But who would begrudge him that now?" Perhaps the working public would begrudge well-stocked cellars even existing in the first place, maybe?

"Shouldn't we raise the alarm?" I suggested.

"No need to disturb anyone. Not when you're about to tell me how your investigation is proceeding."

"So that you can get the glory and a reward?"

"So that you don't get a magic bullet in your chest."

"You know how to make a guy feel special. But we're both familiar with the name of the guilty party."

"Spit it out."

"Alan Burn, the caretaker."

Before she spoke, a flicker of sadness crossed her face. "I remember. He confessed to the murder of a fellow City Scroll Office employee. Most notorious. Hang on, that was more than 30 years ago." Her eyelids narrowed to slits, while the emerald-hard light between them blazed even brighter.

"I'm sure you were going to add that his victim had been poisoned by Jersey root, but that the method of administration remained a mystery."

"You mean..."

"Look at the vintage on the bottle."

"I'll arrange for an immediate and complete magic sweep of the cellars. Meanwhile, you really must lighten your reading. You're good. A bit too good."

I swallowed hard at the familiar neon burst from the GUN. The bullet hit me so quick that I never heard the shot.

* * *

I came to in my office. By the clock I'd only been out for two hours. I grimaced at the soreness in my chest, but a sleep-enchantment bullet wasn't the worst. Her flicker of emotion had kindled my curiosity. Plus, pointing the finger at a dead man made me feel uneasy, not least because Alan Burn famously professed his innocence right up to the end. I didn't believe in relative guilt, but this case could well change my mind.

The only enchantments I ever used, apart from flashing my winning smile at a broad, were the illicit tracer type. Like my crystal, which would glow brighter with every step nearer the invisible marker I'd placed on her very tasteful blouse. Her path was the key to this mystery, and she didn't exactly walk on the sunny side of the street.

* * *

The next night we passed between high double doors and entered the musty smelling main scroll room. Scrolls filled sturdy mahogany pigeon-holes from floor to ceiling. The "we" in question being me and yesterday's pebble. My amateur, not quite so polished pebble. Now I held my own GUN against her undulating back, together with a thirst for truth and revenge. Probably in that order.

Four large glow-spells, a slightly higher quality of mustard, gave the room a jaundiced look. Rain began to beat against the windows, like the fists of an angry prisoner on death row, driven by the storm of his anguished cries. It matched my mood. A simple mahogany table with several easy chairs occupied the middle of the room.

"Okay, get looking" I commanded.

"Where? What for?" she pouted.

"In the section containing scrolls bound by blue ribbon, for the scroll without one." Like I said, an amateur.

During her search, my gaze strayed to the view beyond the window. Every building wore a multi-colored crown of magic that sparkled around the roof and upper floors. Their combined lights shimmered and danced through the sheets of rain. How could a few magic clans now run a once proud and independent city? How could something so pretty contain so much menace? She belonged here. Unfortunately, so did I.

After about 20 minutes she found it, hastily unfurling it on the table. Maybe a foot square, it had a surface densely packed with runes. I gave it the once-over and sighed. "Magic script."

She read in deep absorption, increasingly grim faced. She straightened up. "Well, at least we understand why the late Keeper needed a drink."

"Don't go the mysterious magic-user on me, I'm holding the GUN."

"Alan Burn was innocent."

A flash of lightning violently lit the room, followed almost immediately by a loud peel of thunder that shook the windows.

"Explain."

"With Burn gone, year by year, the actual murderer became so wretched with guilt that, on his death bed, he wrote this scroll, confessing how he had administered Jersey root by means of a poison dart."

"Not the wine?"

"He then cast a hex, so that 30 years later this very scroll would appear in the presence of his successor."

"So you're saying that the actual murderer was the then Keeper of the City Scrolls?"

"Which is why the most recent holder of the office, a man with a strict sense of honor, took his own life."

"For the honor of the office?"

"For the honor of the family. They were father and son. His dad launched the dart by blowing through a scroll."

The rain pelted mercilessly against the windows as lightning flashed. The thunder now lagged behind. I understood enough of magic script to see that she wasn't lying.

"Sometimes," she said, "wanting to know the truth is far better than the truth itself."

"You said it. Because don't flatter yourself that I consider you an innocent party." She looked genuinely surprised. Broadway was missing a star.

"Screwballs shouldn't be allowed to play with GUNs," she retorted. Her wit kicked sharper than troll-bourbon.

I smiled. "For a start, we're both aware that the most recent Keeper drank the wine entirely of his own free choice."

"Tell me something new."

"Oh no, I'll tell you some very old information. You're the person who deliberately chose that particular bottle."

"You've lost it. I hardly knew the Keeper."

"Which made murdering him so much easier."

"At what point are you going to mention something so mundane as a motive?"

"At the point when I mention something that's common knowledge - your name."

"Jayne Waller, what of it?"

"Your real surname that is. Burn. Daughter of the caretaker."

She frowned. "How did you find out?"

"I tailed you to your mama's apartment. Neighbors the world over can't get enough greenbacks."

For once she didn't have a razor-edged reply, and I missed it. "Your ideal revenge would have been against the previous Keeper. But his son would do." She hung her head.

"Now what?" she whispered.

I fired the GUN. Another sleep-enchantment bullet. Which gave me enough time to rouse building security from wherever they were sleeping. For building security read private police force. Just don't ask them how you can appeal against their decisions. I passed on the details anonymously, not wanting anything further to do with either private police forces or a building that held very bad memories for me.

* * *

Magic - it was all freaky. But perhaps not as freaky as my reliance on troll-bourbon. It had dulled my senses once too often. I'd drunk my final drop. I wanted to stay alert. Never again

would I have a GUN drawn on me without being able to draw mine. Like now.

"It's way too late," I told her from behind my desk. "Your people have all the information about you." From around the corner of a closet door she gave an imperious sneer - the best kind.

"I've thought about revenge for many, many years. But only when my people offered to reward me for my troubles did I begin to consider it seriously."

"Don't tell me, the Keeper made enemies of them too."

"Got it in one."

"Jayne, you're sick."

"Not as sick as you're going to be."

We fired together. When we came round, I asked her out for a Java.

The End

T. P. Keating recently finished a 3-year run as chief writer for the Puppet Theatre of Prague, which was an extremely rewarding experience (in an artistic sense!). His written work also appears online in Bloodlust-UK.com, PlotsWithGuns.com, Printed Poison, Saucy Tales of the Supernatural, The3rddegree.com and Rutger Hauer's personal website.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 30

sent.

Ry-anne felt light-footed as they wandered along to the public stalls. “Shall we take only one horse?” she asked when they reached the fences.

The grounds were quiet, and even in the Chill Season, crickets throbbed slowly. Markooth smiled. Her heart skipped. The moonlight bathed his angular face in silvery light and the Guard tattoo stood stark and strong over his left eye and cheek. He was so handsome.

“I do miss old Grey,” he said as he opened the gate, picking a sturdy looking chestnut gelding before looking about for a suitable harness.

He did, too -- Ry-anne felt it in him. And he’d never been able to bring himself to choose another personal horse after Grey’s passing. “I’ll help,” she said. She tickled the gelding’s peachy nose before slipping the bit into his mouth.

Markooth deliberated on a saddle to use. Then he smacked his head. “What am I doing? If we’re riding together we’d better not use a saddle.” He dropped the heavy object back in its pile and walked back to the Gelding.

“After you,” he said. Ry-anne bit her lip to suppress a smile and rose upwards gently, forgetting that she was trying to be ladylike for one eve and hitched up her skirts to better mount the horse.

She felt Markooth’s eyes slide over her legs. He squashed a fleeting erotic thought and lifted up behind, wrapping his arms around her middle as she picked up the reigns. Her stomach muscles flinched at his touch and she wondered whether the Judiciary could obscure it as touch with intent.

“Ready?” Markooth asked.

She controlled her breathing, found her voice. “No. Wait.”

“What’s wrong?” he leaned around and his hands shifted, sending an shiver through her body.

Doesn’t he know how he’s making me feel? “Let’s stay here,” she said and twisted around to see him better. She could see the blocked pores on his nose, the dry skin on his lips, the disquieting flash of his golden eyes. Fair eyebrows frowned.

“I want…” She couldn’t say the words.

It took her breath away when he mentally touched the side of her face with a heatless graze. Her eyes fluttered closed then burst open when an invisible kiss pressed her lips. Her insides swarmed with desire and she felt him draw away and mentally lift them both down off the horse. They lay next to each other and closed their eyes. Ry-anne reached out clumsily and mentally kissed him back, gasping for breath. They floated together, entwined in their minds.

But all the while she felt Markooth resist. He didn’t want this to go too far. But Ry-anne did. She rolled onto her side, the damp grass prickling her and, unable to hold back, she leaned over and kissed him--full on the mouth.

“Ry-anne!” He shoved her back roughly. But then their gazes tangled once more and he gripped her shoulders. As he illegally stroked her cheek, his breath was hot and loud in her ear.

“Oh Grand,” he whispered, swallowed nervously.

“Markooth,” she said softly and captured his mouth in another kiss. But he moved back. Their lips parted with a smack, her mouth wet from his saliva. His eyes, doors to his state of mind, were closed in pain.

He stood, leaving her staring at him, completely perplexed. “Did I not kiss right?” she asked. Markooth walked away. She jumped up and grabbed him. “Markooth! Don’t leave--just tell me what went wrong!”

He shook her off roughly and she skidded on the dewy grass, landing on her backside. She stared up at him, hurt and confused. Apologizing mentally, he lifted her up with mentals. But Ry-anne had seen inside him. For one moment her touch had disgusted him. It was too much to bear. She knew he was really disgusted with himself, but that didn't stop her from getting defensive.

"Get out of here then if I'm not good enough! If I make you so sick! I never wanted you for a partner anyway!" She bit her lip. *Oh Markooth I'm sorry--I didn't -*

No…I--I should never have let it get this far. I'm weak--I'm…evil.

"You're evil because you want to make love to me?" Ry-anne was incredulous.

"You know I didn't mean that," he sighed. "I'd better go."

He was leaving her? "Go then, if you're so scared. Scared of what I might make you feel."

"Stop it, Ry."

"Deny it then. You're afraid to be alone with me, aren't you?"

"Don't do this to me!"

"Afraid you'll do to me what that…thing did to Cate," she said quietly.

Markooth clamped his hands over his ears. The horses fidgeted, nervous about the negative emotions. Ry-anne grabbed his hands and tried to yank them down. "Stop running away, Markooth. You don't have to do that with me."

It was strange to see her Pair in tears. Tears that flashed as sharp as knives in dark wild eyes. He slumped to the ground and she sank down beside him, flinching, as he did, when she got too close. She shuffled back a little.

"Why did you have to tell me about this, Ry-anne?" His voice was without inflection. A sigh like the wind sieving through dry grass.

"But you half-knew it, didn't you? And well, I thought that…I thought the knowledge would help you and Lefus. And us."

His fingers noosed around a clump of grass. Snapped it. "It didn't."

She gulped. "I'm sorry."

The wind whistled a song of mourning.

Ry-anne licked her lips. "You did tell Lefus, didn't you?"

And why do you care about Lefus so much? came the thought raging in his head. Aloud he shrugged and said, "It came as no surprise. Lefus has experienced more than his fair share of evil in this fine, fair land."

"But you won't talk about it?"

"It is the way amongst brothers."

"Perhaps you ought to. It may help. And what of Josephine--and Cate and Kelthro?"

"You're not Grand yet, Ry-anne. You'd do well to remember that. Soon you'll be able to meddle in people's lives all you like."

She bit back her anger. "I only mean that being able to abandon the pretence might bring you all closer."

"Oh yes, of course. I'm sure my mother would love to know that her sons are aware that a demon from another dimension assaulted her so traumatically that she could not stand to bear children and they had to employ a commoner to mate with my father to produce his heirs. Thank you for your insight, Ry-anne--I shall do that right away. Why I didn't think of it before I don't kno -"

"All right!" She lowered her voice. "All right. But won't you think of Josephine, too? It pains her deeply -"

Markooth's eyes flashed. "And how would you know what that woman feels?"

His temper frightened her. But Ry-anne pushed on. There was something else he ought to know. "That woman? Markooth, Josephine is your real birth mother and she loves you dearly."

He shook his head. "What I don't understand is why the Grand saw fit to tell you this--and not the people who it actually concerns."

Ry-anne bowed her head. "Madrea--the Grand--she passes on certain bits of knowledge to me. She hopes that you will resolve this before--before it is too late. Time grows short on this matter."

Markooth's eyes dove for her. "What did you say?"

Ry-anne frowned. "That you should all discuss this before -?"

"No, that time grows short. That's what *she* said, years ago now. Pray tell, o powerful Pair, if your Grand is so all-knowing, why did she not prevent your sister's demise?"

Ry-anne lashed out--struck him sharply across the cheek. Markooth's reaction was even mightier.

Her hand went to her face. They both stared. Horrified.

"Ry-anne wait--I never meant--please, you have to understand. There's things you don't know--things I wish I could tell you! Ry-anne!"

But she ran away. She sped through the fields heading Grand knew where. Tears blurred her vision--her cheek was hotter than fire. But the fact that Markooth did not come after her hurt far more than his slap.

She ran out of steam by the lake. And Lefus was there.

"What has put you in such a state?" he asked, looking up from the water.

She sniffed and swallowed down her tears. "It's nothing."

"Don't leave."

Something about his voice pulled her back. In the four Seasons that he had trained--or tried to train her--they had never spoken much outside of lessons. He would never accept her invitations to accompany them into Pantherea town. When she asked Markooth why, he explained that Lefus had never felt the need for friends. He certainly had no friends that Ry-anne knew of. Why are you interested anyway? Markooth would tease. He thought she had a crush on Lefus. Which, of course, was completely untrue. What is it about him? Markooth would ask. Those dark good looks? The mystery? You're disillusioned, she would reply. Which, of course, was completely untrue.

After four Seasons of nothing more than 'tuck roll this, pike somersault that' and the occasional satisfied smile or longer than necessary look when she did something right, 'Don't leave' was progress.

With a sigh, she walked around to Lefus' side of the lake and sat down.

His eyes were lost in the black, black water. "Why do you like it here so much?" she asked, in an attempt to fill the silence.

In the darkness, he flinched visibly. Oil black hair slid over his eyes, shadowing his face. All she could see was blood red lips, full and dark in the moon's glow, and a jagged jaw line.

"I don't," he said eventually, when she had all but given up on getting an answer. She watched his lips move, just barely, and his teeth glitter dully in the moonlight.

"Then why the Grand are you here so often?"

The lips pressed together, shone bone white as the emotions--anger?--passed. He shrugged. "No reason."

Ry-anne exhaled lengthily. Her own eyes went to the water, and out of boredom she stretched forward and scooped up a handful of pebbles. Some dirt went up her fingernails and

she stopped to clean them out before throwing the first pebble into the lake. It plopped in with a *doink*. She threw another whilst Lefus sat in silence. Sighed. Then another. Ry-anne glanced at him to see if he still breathed--but his eyes were on the water, as though it was a reservoir for all his sorrow.

"Marlena died in the water."

What? She looked to him and saw a muscle pop in his jaw as he clenched and unclenched his teeth. His throat worked as he swallowed.

"She was your Pair?" Ry-anne asked carefully. A nod. "Well, where did it happen? Sorry--you don't have to say."

He shook the hair out of his eyes and gazed wistfully at the moons. "The Green Sea, behind the Fishing Village," he said. "This very day, all those Seasons ago."

Ry-anne looked down at her sandals, feeling like an intruder on his grief. Yet the Fishing Village sparked her own grief for Kyna. Oh Grand.

"I can't imagine how hard that must have been."

Eyes slowly turned her way. Their gaze connected…dropped. "Thank you."

They both sighed in time. And then Lefus drew his knees up and rested his head on them. "I killed her."

Ry-anne's heart stopped. And then galloped. Her body went rigid. She shot him a look but his head stayed on his knees, eyes out of sight. The old childhood fear she used to have returned and knocked the breath out of her. Her palms grew sweaty.

"You can go now," he said, not looking up.

Grand, how she wanted to just get out of there and run back to safe Markooth. Markooth, who she could figure and feel and understand. Well, most of the time. "No," she said, without knowing why. "I feel like sitting here awhile."

Lefus looked her way. His eyes were black pits of distrust. "Everybody else ran away about now."

"Who did? Who ran away?"

He shrugged. "The kids in the school room or mentals class. Whenever I told anyone what I'd done, they all left me alone. People were afraid of me."

His look was challenging and Ry-anne thought, *Grand, people have a right to be scared if you say it like that.* And maybe she should have scampered with the rest of the kids, but she didn't. Couldn't.

"But that was a long time ago."

"Markooth told me a little about Marlena some time ago. I don't think you killed her, Lefus."

The jaw clenched once more--he turned away again. Like a curtain being drawn, the hair fell over his face. "You can't know a damned thing about it," he mumbled.

"Tell me then," she ventured, heart beating wildly.

He stood up sharply and towered over her. The movement frightened her--and it was intended to do so. Ry-anne sat her ground and waited for him to either calm or attack her. She prepared her mentals just in case. Eventually, he sat back down, rested his arms over his knees and drew a breath. Some pebbles disturbed by his movement scattered into the lake.

"We were playing," he spoke to the water. "Back then, it had been a long time since there were any cracks in the dimension. Immediates had no qualms about letting their children explore the land. So we went to the Green Sea to pick shells. Marlena loved shells--she collected them. I only went because she wanted to and because I thought I could maybe stab some fish to

take home."

He rubbed his face wearily. "I found this one shell--huge it was and all whirly, too. You should have seen her eyes light up." His smile was bright, tinged with sadness. "But I wouldn't let her have it, would I? She was seven and I was eight so that made me the boss. I threw that shell right out to sea. But she wanted it, fool girl, and she swam and swam and swam out--all for a blasted shell."

Bitterness and pain stopped him as he struggled not to let the emotion overwhelm him. He looked directly at Ry-anne, shoulders hunched and brows furrowed. "There was something in that water with us that aft. I'll swear that to you right now." He shook his head. "I yelled at her to come back--even started to swim out because she wasn't the best swimmer. But then I saw it. This black…*mass* beneath the water. And it was headed straight for her. The water started to suck away, sucking her--me--everything in there with it. I panicked and dove for the shore.

"And then I just stood there and watched as the sea ate her alive. There was this…" He fumbled for words. "This *laughter*. And then the water came back and Marlena was gone."

Ry-anne didn't know what to say. Nightmare visions of the day Kyna was taken pummelled her and she struggled to swim out of them.

"So you see," Lefus said, his voice hoarse. "It was my fault. I killed my own Pair." He swore and pounded the ground. A small ant scuttled away from the earthquake.

Suddenly, it was clear. All those Seasons she had blamed herself for Kyna's death were seen in a new light. Lefus' situation was exactly the same. They had both been children--there was nothing either of them could have done--yet they still tortured themselves.

"What is it?"

A tear trickled down Ry-anne's nose and plopped into her lap, staining her robe. "I was thinking about my sister."

He hesitated. "That wasn't your fault, Ry-anne."

"Marlena wasn't yours," she challenged. And Lefus thought on that one. He managed to summon a half smile.

"Maybe. Maybe," he said, his dark eyes attached to her own. Ry-anne tore her gaze away and bit her lip.

"So, what ails you my young apprentice? I do hope my dear brother hasn't been upsetting you. Especially since the Rise is almost upon us. You'll need perfect mental health if you are to win through the challenges and become Grand."

Her stomach was abruptly upset. "I don't even want to think about that. I'm not prepared for it at all."

"Destiny chose you, Ry-anne."

"Well I wish it hadn't."

"That's natural." They lapsed into silence. They'd had this conversation before but it never really helped. Who could ever reassure you that being a mortal god would be just fine? Even the Grand herself would not be pressured to talk about that aspect of it. *You will learn in your own way how to cope--if you do not, then you will not cope.* Simple, she would snap, before going back to a magic lecture.

"What's wrong with your face?" Lefus asked, peering closer.

Ry-anne had forgotten. Automatically, she touched a hand to one cheek and winced when she found the bone was sore. "It's nothing."

"Grand help you in the Challenge if you're unable to fend off common attacks."

"I thank you, Lefus. Your concern is endearing." She plucked up strands of grass.

He was silent. Then he cleared his throat. "I cannot help but think of things from a trainer's point of view. But…I am concerned. How did you allow yourself to get struck?"

"Oh Grand!" She threw her hands up and screamed. "Because I didn't expect it from this person, that's why! Pray Grand you are satisfied with that excuse."

Lefus was quiet. She heard him breath in and out. When next he spoke his voice was low and controlled. "You must never let your guard down, Ry-anne. Not ever--do you hear? The worst assaults can come from the least expected directions."

"Is this another lesson?"

"It's advice and you would be wise to heed it. This rule is imperative. Never let your guard down. Ever. Never ever let your heart rule your head."

Ry-anne rolled her eyes. "You have been over all this with me before."

"And obviously you were not listening, as usual."

She tutted. Lefus sat but a hand away, shaking his head and smoldering. Markooth had blocked her so much lately that she was thrilled to feel the heat of Lefus' emotions. His anger was somehow refreshing.

"Ry-anne?"

She turned his way, surprise registering in her bulging eyes when Lefus captured the back of her neck in one palm and dragged her lips onto his. Sparks seem to course from his warm mouth and into her own, flowing down her throat where they then flooded the rest of her body and brought her to life. Her eyes fluttered closed, yielding, and she sank into the luxurious kiss, all stress and tension floating away.

He pulled away and stared, black pupils wide in his black eyes.

Ry-anne rolled her lips inwards and swallowed, savoring the last taste of him. Silently, he watched the movement. Black eyes flicked back to hers.

"Was that an example of how not to let your heart rule your head then?" Ry-anne asked, finding her voice.

The eyes narrowed and his gaze slid away with a dark look in them. "I see now why my brother smacked you," he muttered.

She punched him square on the nose. He keeled backwards, hands clutching his face. To her horror, blood spilled through his fingers, running freely onto his robe. She was in trouble now.

"Holy Grand, girl," he said, sounding like he had a cold.

"Here, tip your head back you fool--or it'll just keep coming."

"Dont fink you're in a position to be calling be dames," he said. Ry-anne shoved his chin upwards to try and stem the blood flow.

"Pinch it. Like this." She gripped the bridge of his nose and his bloody fingers took over. She saw his throat work as he swallowed with disgust. Eventually the blood slowed. Ry-anne ripped a strip off the hem of her robe, the sound of cloth tearing through the silent night. She crumpled it up and stuffed it into his hands, ordering him to keep it over his nose until the blood had completely stopped.

After a time Lefus moved the cloth away from his face and dabbed his nostrils, which were now crusty with dried blood. Then he looked at Ry-anne. She braced herself but he actually smiled. He even chuckled.

"I did not expect this reaction, I must say."

"You have some nerve, girl," he said.

She laughed. "You *are* crazy."

He kneeled over the bank and shook his hands clean in the cold water and dried them on the chest of his robe. And then, quite naturally, he reached out and brushed the hair from her face--the hair she had groomed and perfumed all for Markooth--and traced one cool finger down the side of her throat. He landed at the base of her neck, whereupon he bent forward and planted the softest of kisses in the spot his finger had marked. Then his eyes confronted her own, seeming happy but sad at the same time.

"This must never happen again," he said. "Markooth is my brother, and for what it's worth, I'm off to tell him what I think of his striking a maiden. I'll see you in the battle room this coming morn. At dawn."

And so he went, without even giving her time to protest that she had provoked Markooth and it wasn't really his fault.

TWO

You are troubled, my pet," the Grand said to Markooth the next morn.

They were alone in her room. She sat up in a bed that had been brought in, being too ill to sit in her chair any longer. Markooth kept his eyes straight ahead, determined not to be riled today. The Grand shifted in the bed and inhaled sharply through her teeth.

"Come. Throw another pillow behind me, would you?" Reluctantly, Markooth walked over to her bedside and did as she asked. The stink of death, rotten insides, and failing organs sickened him. Her shoulder was all bones and no flesh as he helped her lean forward while he tucked the pillow at the base of her back. She reached up and her finger trembled as she stroked it over his lips. He controlled a shiver. What with all this blocking from Ry-anne, trying to focus on the Dimension and now having to keep this sordid scene from Ry-anne's mind, Markooth thought his head might explode.

"Tell me your problems," she said, plopping her twig-like arm back down on the blanket.

"Why bother?" he growled. "You know them already."

The Grand shrugged. "I enjoy the conversation. So like my Onigh you are, Markooth--stubborn. He also resisted my advances at first." She hooted with laughter, making him flinch. But she winced from the action herself and clutched her stomach. "I'm joking of course. Onigh would love me no more if I hurt a young man like you. So tell me your troubles, my pet. I do so love to hear you talk."

Thankfully, she moved her fingers away. Markooth wet his lips. "Ry-anne and I had a fight last eve," he said.

"Oh wonderful," she clapped, as though she did not know already. There was a terse smile on her face, the old pain ever present beneath it. "One that I had not even instigated. Is that where you got the black eye from?"

"No." He swallowed. "That was a gift from Lefus."

"Why, pray tell?"

"Oh, you know why! Why do we have to go through this ridiculous mime every time? You know *everything,* so why should I ever have to tell you *anything?*"

The Grand sighed. "Because I do so like to hear *you* tell it to me, my dear."

Markooth's right eye twitched twice. He sighed. "Lefus hit me because I slapped Ry-anne."

"Oh my. Whatever for?"

"I'm not continuing with this. I have work to do."

The Grand's fingers gripped her bedclothes. "You will do as I say, young pet, and as Destiny tells you. Or are you a heretic, sir Glandor?"

Markooth closed his eyes briefly. He needed a release from all this pressure. There were enough secrets in his life already without the Grand forcing him to keep situations like this from Ry-anne.

She spoke again. "Ah now Lefus, let me see…yes--young Lefus has eyes for your not-so-

innocent Pair. Our marvelous Grand in waiting, sweet, chaste Ry-anne. She's quite the adept with her spells, pet, though I would never tell her that. The girl's complacent enough."

Markooth uncurled his fists and tried to relax. "What do you mean not so innocent?"

"Well you've prodded her haven't you?" the Grand asked.

A flush stained his bronze cheeks. "I have not--and that wasn't what I was asking and you know it."

Markooth saw the Grand shrug out of the corner of his eye. "Ah, but one does not always get what one asks for, does one? For example, I know you would never grant me my heart's desire and I would never bend you to it either. That isn't my way. Yet still you fear me, don't you pet?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked quietly. And they both knew what he was talking about, but the door opened and Indo let in a servant with a mediocre breakfast, medicines and the chief taster. But as the Grand cursed at them all to get out--the medicine reminded her of her frailty--Markooth knew that he would never have gotten an answer anyway.

THREE

Ry-anne trudged into the battle room and rubbed sleep from her eyes. She could see Lefus warming up in preparation for the morn's training. Her eyes were glued to his muscular form as it managed to perform roll after roll in mid air. How he bent so much muscle in such graceful arrangements was beyond her. As she watched, he began to wind down and the rolls became less and less until he eventually punched his arms out wide and his legs unfolded, stopping his forward momentum. Slowly, and with perfect control, he lowered himself to the ground.

By that time, Ry-anne was only steps away from him. She yawned, for something to do, when Lefus noticed her. Memories of their kiss last eve were all the more embarrassing in the light of morn. They both avoided each other's eyes.

"Good morn," Lefus mumbled and busied himself with refolding a towel.

"Morn." She shucked her sandals off.

Lefus threw the folded towel outside of the mat, causing it to fall out of the folds he had seemed so intent on making. They both pretended not to notice. Ry-anne inhaled and drifted into the air, arms out and toes pointed. She moved through a quick warm up with added focus before Lefus' increasingly critical eyes. First she balled up and rolled forward ten times, slammed to a stop and battled against inertia, before willing herself to start rolling backwards. Then she spread out again and twisted vertically. She finished with the hardest roll--a horizontal.

Making sure she performed her breathing correctly, Ry-anne turned so that she lay on her side. For that position, it was imperative that every muscle in her body was taut. From her neck muscles to the obliques, to her glute, thigh and leg muscles. The spine had to be directly in line with the rest of the body, otherwise her whole form would tremble and she would lose position if it remained uncorrected. Finally, the lengths of her arms were also tensed, especially the left, which was nearest to the floor and so wanted to hang down like her hair.

Only when she was satisfied that her body was in alignment did Ry-anne begin to turn. Slowly at first, because she always struggled to get going, but then faster and faster. Body and mind worked in tandem. Muscles tensed and relaxed, gave and took, depending on their position in the twist, and always she knew which way was up or down. It had taken Ry-anne a whole half season to master this maneuver. And a further Period to be able to shout out whether she faced more up or more down whenever Lefus decided to yell "Stop!"

Ry-anne ceased rotation flawlessly. She would be facing the front wall. Sure enough, she opened her eyes and gazed at the banner flags drawn over the front wall. Lefus looked up, arms folded. She knew that he tried to pick out where she had been lax, thus throwing her spine a fraction out of alignment. Taking a deep breath in this time, Ry-anne hauled her head up vertically and sank gracefully to the ground.

"Any problems?" she asked, breathing out through her mouth. She bent down to grab up a towel.

"You slightly over-contracted your deltoid muscles. Otherwise, great."

She nodded. "I'll remember for next time. What's this session's schedule?"

"Sparring." Lefus said. "Take a breather and have a drink and we shall commence."

Ry-anne padded over to a jug of water by the window and raised it to her lips, then passed it to Lefus, who had come up behind. He took a few gulps and then put it back on the window shelf with a clunk. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and Ry-anne could not help but stare at his moist lips. Lefus caught her look. She flicked her eyes away and fiddled with the ribbon that was supposed to keep the hair out of her face.

"And how is your nose?"

"Not broken, luckily for you."

She smiled to herself. "I am sorry about that."

"I doubt it. Come now, take your fight position."

"Wait, should we not speak about last eve?" Ry-anne felt her face go red as she wished she could suck her words back in.

Lefus' expression was unreadable. "You cannot tell an enemy to wait before he devours your spirit while you are sorting out your relationships."

"Funny."

He shrugged. "You know as well as I that we should forget what happened. We were talking about an emotional subject and, not surprisingly, it got to us. It was nothing more and nothing less. All right?"

Ry-anne nodded. "Yes."

"Good." He stared at her, then twisted away and strode back over to the mat. They took up their positions, just as sandals clattered into the hall.

"Ry-anne! Ry! Oh thank the Grand you're here! It's Gwyneth! Come quick!" It was Andee, sweating, puffed--and terrified. Without hesitation, Ry-anne bolted after her brother and heard Lefus dash after her.

Ry-anne heard Gwyneth before she saw her. She was in on the bed in her chamber, screaming like a dying babby as all their Immediates tried unsuccessfully to calm her. Clumps of beautiful blonde hair surrounded her. She'd torn it out. The air smelled of fenner--no, it *stank* of fenner. An icy dread birthed inside Ry-anne, one that crawled around her body and took up home in her stomach. Maids hovered outside the chamber, not sure what to do. Gwyneth grunted and moaned. Tears drowned her face and her eyes were lost.

"She was trying to take this!" Gamine shook an empty vial of fenner.

"How much did you drink, Gwyn?" Ry-anne asked. Gwyneth didn't reply, just continued to moan. The sound wrenched at the heart.

Pappy Johann tried to stroke her jagged hair, but Gwyneth slapped him away and then buried her face in her arms and sobbed. Of a sudden, she let out a piercing wail.

"I just want to die!" she moaned and threw her head back, face contorted with pain. She dribbled. Mucous blurred with a mess of tears and Ry-anne was suddenly very afraid. Gwyneth squealed again and grabbed what was left of her hair. She tugged it.

"No!"

"Gwyneth honey! Don't!"

It was chaos as Immediates pleaded with her to stop. Ry-anne pushed her way through the gathering and sat on the edge of the bed. Her heart sprinted as she grabbed Gwyneth and held her. She resisted violently but Ry-anne held tight. Soon, pale arms snuck around Ry-anne's middle and held on tight. Her elder sister cried her heart out, body shaking, until she started to grow sleepy.

Ry-anne looked up into concerned faces and shook her head slowly. She shrugged. Lefus motioned that he was going outside. Ry-anne tried to tell him that he didn't have to leave, but he went anyway.

"I miss Davvy," Gwyneth whispered.

"I know you do. But he still loves you, Gwyn. He just wants you to stop drinking and start looking after yourself. That's the only reason he left," Ry-anne said and hoped that was the truth.

"But Pairs shouldn't abandon each other! He blocks me out totally, Ry, just to torture me!" Gwyneth struggled in Ry-anne's grasp.

"Shhh," Ry-anne said and smoothed her sister's spiky hair, holding her tighter. Her scalp was red and sore, spotted with blood.

"Miss Kyna too."

Ry-anne bit her lip and swallowed. "I know."

"Gwynnie?"

Ry-anne looked up to see Davvy standing in front of the bed. Sweat soaked his clothes.

"Oh my Gwynnie--what did you do to yourself?" He tried to keep the tears back.

Gwyneth stared at him, her mouth open, ripped hair sticking up as mucous and tears dripped down her face. Ry-anne eased off the bed because all Gwyneth could see now was Davvy. He gave Ry-anne a thank you smile and took Gwyneth in his arms, kissing her wet cheeks.

"Don't leave me again, Davvy. I beg you, don't ever leave again--I can't take it. Four Seasons Davvy--why? How could you do it?"

Ry-anne could see how Gwyneth's words sliced him. He closed his eyes briefly. "I was just trying to help--to make you wake up from what you were doing. I couldn't watch you slowly kill yourself, Gwyn."

"I slept around when you were gone."

The group of Immediates decided it was probably time to leave. They began to shuffle towards the chamber doors.

"I know you did. But it doesn't matter to me."

"You don't hate me?"

"Oh Gwynnie, I never could. I won't leave you alone again. I swear."

Gwyneth sobbed again, but this time with a sort of joy. Davvy looked up at Ry-anne and they exchanged worried glances. She squeezed Davvy's shoulder and then left them to their privacy. Lefus had gone.

Weary, Ry-anne trudged into Gamine and Johann's room. Everybody was there. Even Helene and Kayina. Ry-anne tickled the babby's chin and then sighed down on one of the benches.

"Why did she do that, Ry-anne?" Pappy Mallun asked in a concerned whisper.

Ry-anne shook her head. "I think she blamed herself over Kyna." Helene sighed deeply and squeezed her new babby all the tighter. "She started to drink and…sort of…misbehave I suppose, but I think when Davvy left her it got too much to bear." She shrugged.

Mallun drifted away, nodding gravely. Gamine crumpled into tears and clung onto Ry-anne. "I couldn't go on if anything happened to Gwyneth, Ry-anne. I just couldn't."

"I know Mammy. Nothing will--she's got Davvy now. Things will get better."

"Oh I hope so. Grand, I hope so," she said. Johann told Mammy she should lie down. He gave Ry-anne a kiss on the cheek and they left. Gradually, people started to go back to their own rooms and Ry-anne sat on a while longer, then decided that she needed some fresh air.

Lefus sat on the step that led into the East Wing. He had his back to her as he stared out

at the sky.

"Were you here all this time?"

Startled, he got up hastily and brushed himself off. "I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help."

Ry-anne smiled. "You didn't have to wait down here."

"Well…" He shrugged.

Ry-anne sat on the step where Lefus had been sitting. He followed suit and she moved over to make room. They sat together, arms nearly touching, for a long time before anybody spoke.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Ry-anne sighed. "Guilty. I should have known this was going to happen. I knew she was in trouble, Lefus. I just ignored it. I…"

Lefus put cool fingers over her left hand. "It wasn't your fault."

Ry-anne leaned to the right and rested her head against the rough stone. Neither of them moved their hands. "Just tell me one thing. How am I supposed to protect the whole of Glandor if I can't even look after my own sister? Sisters, for that matter."

"Don't think that way."

She slumped against the step. Lefus' thumb started to stroke the back of her hand and she lifted off the wall to look at him. Her eyes went down to his strong, wide hands and back up to his black eyes…his lips. Her own image was reflected in his pupils and she noticed that his nose was slightly swollen and pink. His lips parted and Ry-anne found that she was absorbed in watching the skin between the top and bottom lip unstick.

And then all she could see was his mouth. Appetizing and cherry-colored and nicely shaped. She wanted to touch the soft flesh with her fingers--taste it with her tongue. Without noticing, she leaned closer.

"Not here," Lefus said. He shook his head once and Ry-anne sat up sharply, breathless. Her face was flushed, yet they hadn't even done anything.

"Sorry."

"Don't take any offense."

Ry-anne looked at the wall. She couldn't help it. She was hurt. "I'm not," she told the brick, then got up and went to go back inside. Lefus grabbed her wrist. She threw him off and rushed through the hallway to the stairs. She had one foot up when Lefus' hand clamped around her upper arm and yanked her about.

"What?" she hissed.

He didn't seem to know. Twice he was about to say something, but then thought better of it. Ry-anne tutted and moved back to the stairs. His fingers pinched tighter. "No." He said. "I know what I want to say--it's saying it that's the trouble."

"Just tell me."

She watched his tongue slip out as he licked his lips. He let go of her arm and covered his eyes with one hand. "Oh Grand, what am I doing?" he muttered to himself. But Ry-anne waited. She wanted him to say it out loud. "I…you…you're the closest thing I've ever had to a friend, all right?"

Ry-anne kept staring. Lefus squirmed under her gaze and sweat stood out on his top lip. He shook his head. "No, that's not all right. That's not what I mean--well it is but…well I mean more. I want to say more."

"Say it then," she whispered. Her mouth was dry and her eyes glanced up the stairs,

praying that nobody would come down.

Lefus swallowed, thought a moment, eyes flickering under his lids. Left and right. Then he just shook his head and shrugged. "I love you."

All the breath went out of her. Lefus cautiously met her eyes.

"But how can you? Last eve was the first time you've ever said anything to me other than 'Get that spin in alignment' or 'I said a full twist not a three quarter.'"

"I want the best out of you."

"I'm not talking about that!"

Lefus seemed agitated. "I don't like many people -"

"You don't *know* many people, you keep yourself so isolated."

"Will you just listen? This is difficult."

Ry-anne acquiesced.

He scratched the back of his neck. "I meant to say that, well, you're the only person I've ever wanted to know better. You're irritating and immature but you…you get to me. I need to see you every morn, and I don't know why because you rile me something rotten, but I'm addicted."

"Flattering."

"Will you be serious? I don't especially want to feel like this, but I do." He traced his thumb over her top lip, a whispering touch that made her skin jump and her heart pump madly.

In the secret shadows by the stairs of the East Wing, they searched each other's eyes and souls. Desperate. "Tell me how you feel, Ry-anne. I have to know."

"Ry-anne? Is that you?"

Markooth! The pair of them sprang apart as Markooth stepped into the building.

"I came as soon as I could get off shift. How is Gwyneth?" Markooth's tense expression changed to confusion when he noticed Lefus. "Lefus, ah. Thanks for being here."

"No problem," he said, looking at Ry-anne.

Ry-anne avoided both their gazes. The air was syrupy with tension. Surely Markooth felt it too? Ry-anne tried to keep her mind casually blanketed so that he wouldn't think anything was amiss. "Better now I think. Davvy's here. Oh Grand, what happened to your eye?"

Markooth shrugged it off--darted a look at Lefus. "It happened on shift. It's good that Davvy has come. I'm going to go up and see if there's anything I can do for your Immediates." Markooth started up the staircase. Stopped. "Ry-anne? Aren't you coming?"

Apparently that was what Lefus wanted to know, too. But what he really wanted to know was, *are you going with him?* He looked at her, their conversation unfinished and his question unanswered. Ry-anne turned away and followed Markooth.

"Thank you for coming," she said, twisting around to find Lefus looking down. He nodded and walked out of the door alone.

Some time later, after Markooth had and Johann had chatted sedately, the two of them went into her chamber. Nobody seemed to mind. Markooth sat on the bed and, after a moment's hesitation, she joined him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

It was exactly what Lefus had said. The guilt stung. "I'll cope. I think."

But I'm so confused. All these Seasons I've ached when I've felt you think of other people, when your mind has let slip your encounters with the brothel women, but now I understand the need. I comprehend what every other adult on Glandor knows already. That your Pair will always be part of you, so close he knows what you're thinking before you do, that he could draw a diagram of your mind. But that sometimes you need an escape. That there are different kinds of

love. The intense, indescribable, everlasting one between Pairs, and that invigorating, thrilling one between a man that you can never know fully, but who you want to spend the rest of your life figuring out.

Except, when that man and your Pair where brothers it was not only immoral, it was illegal.

"What's going on between you and Lefus?" he asked.

Ry-anne stood up. "What? Nothing!"

"Then why are you blocking me?"

"Why are you blocking *me*?"

Markooth relented. "Fair enough. It's work--things you can't know. I'm sorry."

Ry-anne sat back down carefully. "I don't like feeling so distant from you."

"It won't be forever." But he seemed sad when he said that. "Ry-anne?"

"What?"

Markooth stared at her like it hurt him. But he shook his head. "Nothing. Forget I spoke. Listen, I might not be able--I mean, I'm going to be too busy to see you for some time. You know the Grand has been ill, yes?"

"Mmhm. That's why I had to start doing my lessons with Lyelle."

"Exactly. Well she grows worse with each passing day. She knows it too. And she needs as many people helping her to protect the Dimension as she can, so…"

"I understand," Ry-anne said quietly. She paused. "Does this mean that the Challenge to Rise will be earlier than we presumed?"

Markooth looked at her out of the corner of his eye. He nodded. "She will probably pass into the Dimension of the Dead within the next seven morns. Then again, the medics have been saying that for Periods. The woman will just not let go."

Ry-anne raised her eyebrows, sighed and chewed her lip. She was trying to feel something--panic, fear, excitement…grief. But she simply could not figure out how she felt at all.

"I've been missing you lately." She looked at him, but he was engrossed in picking a stitch on her bedthrow.

He nodded. "I must leave," he said and stood. Ry-anne stood too, walked behind him to the door. He opened it and glanced back. "I'm sorry for last eve."

"Me too," she said. Her thoughts flew to the kiss with Lefus and her fight with Markooth. Her hand went to her cheek--she lowered it sharply when his look became pained. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

Her Pair gulped. His head dipped faintly. It looked as though there were a thousand things he was bursting to say, but he kept them stoppered, golden eyes downcast. With a brief mental caress, he left. The smell of honey spice lingered long after he had gone, making her feel strangely nostalgic.

She didn't sleep that night.

Gwyneth and Davvy were talking and crying into the early hours, but that wasn't why she couldn't sleep. It was because she felt nervous. Something in Markooth's face…

The next morn she woke before the bells, not realizing she had ever been to sleep. Somebody knocked at her door. It was Lyelle, come to tell her that she must prepare herself for the Rise to become the Grand of Glandor. She would have to go through the Challenge in two morns. Next morn was the opening ceremony--it was a whole two Periods early! Markooth raised his block and broke through her numbness.

Meet me at the house this eve.

FOUR

The barn was quiet and brooding, like the both of them. Ry-anne lay back on a bale of hay, tickling the top of her lip with one straw. Markooth lay at her right. He seemed restless.

Ry-anne twisted on her side to look at him better. The hay whispered as she did so, some of it stabbing her back and making her itch. She scratched her hip absently. The cows snored and Markooth was so still that he could have been asleep himself. The enticing aroma of honey spice drifted towards her. Ry-anne inhaled deeply. A warm glow from the candlelamp gently illuminated his handsome face, and Ry-anne could see that his golden eyes were thoughtful.

"You're thinking of The Rise aren't you?" Ry-anne said. It wasn't really a question, because Ry-anne still thought that she knew everything about Markooth. After all, they had been Paired since infants.

Markooth would not look her way. But he spoke softly. "You ought to be preparing, you know."

Ry-anne threw her head back. "Ugh! Not you as well! It's all my Immediates will talk about. I just want to get away from all that this eve, Markooth. Even Lefus wouldn't leave well enough alone this morn--you must point this and flex that--it's making me insane. As if it isn't hard enough, people keep having to point out that I'm not ready. That it's too early, that -"

"How was my brother this morn?"

Markooth's low, level voice gave her the chills. She thought back to the training session. Her very last one. They'd snapped and riled each other all morn long, both of them tense and in shock from the news. Lefus was scared for her--she saw that in those shadowy dark eyes that he couldn't bring to hers. His fear terrified her.

What's more, last eve still stood between them. *Tell me how you feel, Ry-anne. I have to know.* And how did you bring something like that up again, when the man who said he loved you was your Pair's brother and you were going to be the Grand of Glandor? There would be little time for love when she had Risen to the seat and they both knew it.

After they were done, Lefus simply told her that the session was over. They had lingered, tidied up unnecessarily, drunk water and discussed haltingly whether she had been in form on her warm up routine--not that it mattered now--and then she left. She bit her lip and said a croaky goodbye to Lefus' back. It wasn't flippant either, it wasn't 'Goodbye, I'll see you next morn.' It was truly goodbye. At least that's how it felt. Lefus never replied, nor did he turn around to see her go.

Ry-anne had choked on embarrassing unshed tears by the time she came out into the feeble Chill Period sunshine. It felt colder today than it ever had.

"Ry-anne? I said, how was Lefus?" Markooth repeated, dragging her back to the moment.

She shook her head as if to clear it and attempted a smile. "I'm sorry. It's been a strange day."

"And Lefus?"

Her guilty conscience wished he would stop asking about Lefus. Focusing on a piece of straw, she said, "Oh, Lefus was a little subdued. I'm sure he was just shocked, as we all are."

Ry-anne looked up and Markooth's eyes flicked away fast. "Right," he said and sighed. One corner of his mouth tugged downwards in a sign of disapproval. His head shook faintly. "Don't you even worry that there might be a Challenger?"

Ry-anne blew out loudly, causing her tangled hair to billow outwards. His words annoyed her, but she tried to make light of the mood. "Who would challenge me, Markooth? The Fates have insisted this was my destiny since I was but thirteen Seasons, to Rise to control the House of Glandor. You know that as well as I do."

At last, Markooth turned to face her fully. He propped himself up on one elbow, the hay rustling like dead leaves as he did so. "I am simply warning you of the possibility. And you know that the Fates can prescribe another Challenger to the House at whatever time they want. Just because it has been known for so many Seasons that you would, or should, Rise to power, does not mean that there could not be another."

Ry-anne stared at Markooth, long after he had finished speaking. Possibilities--dangers--darted through her mind. Could there be another Challenger? Could Destiny be informing the Fates of this even now? Come the morrow, would she regret that she had not studied fiercely this day? But what difference would one day of study make now, when she was supposed to have two whole Periods more? Would she lose the Challenge? Worse, would she die? Her heart hurried and her throat was suddenly as dry as the hay beneath her.

Markooth's gaze turned sympathetic. He reached out and grazed her cheek. His skin felt rougher than it used to be, and her own skin bristled at his touch. "I don't mean to frighten you--I just worry," he whispered, as if trying not to wake the cows.

Ry-anne backed away slightly, remembering the eve before last when they had broken the Rules. But she had broken the Rules of physical contact with Lefus and…

Nervously she licked her lips and put on a smile. "Who's frightened?"

Markooth was silent. He looked away from her again, golden eyes glinting sharply when they caught the light.

Ry-anne broke the silence. "Markooth, will you be my partner?"

"What?" His eyes were wide, dazzling her.

She had shocked herself. But she was afraid that eve. And the next morn held life-altering changes for her. Like it or not, she would have to grow up. She couldn't face all that alone.

She swallowed, trying to explain to Markooth. "Well, the Fates have always insisted that our Destinies would be entwined. I want you to be at my side when I Rise. I want you to be my wisdom, my strength…I need somebody." *I need to know.* "Shall we…should we Unite?"

Markooth did attempt to speak. But only sounds came out of his mouth, not words. Eventually he looked away and shook his head. Anger leaked into the air between them, muddying it. Markooth steamed. Ry-anne reached out for him. Her fingers broke the rules of The House of Glandor, and found the skin of his bare shoulder. He flinched.

Ry-anne withdrew sharply. "Markooth, what have I done? Tell me."

The head still shook, his cropped sun-bright hair moving with it. Just when Ry-anne had given up on getting an answer, Markooth rounded on her, threatening as a swarm of stingers. "Unite? Hah! I'll tell you what that is." He stood up, unfolding to his full height, then bent his impressive frame over her. His shadow was like a rain cloud promising thunder, his expression vicious. "That's a joke!"

Ry-anne blinked as spit spotted her cheek. Frowning, she wiped the wetness away and

then shoved Markooth in the chest so that he backpedaled a few inches. She straightened her spine and fixed him with such a glare that the height Markooth had over her wasn't important at all.

"Think I'm scared of you just because you managed to strike me one time? You can't frighten me, Markooth. So you don't *dare*! You don't dare try to dominate me. Standing over me like that--who do you think you are?"

Markooth laughed, sparing no thought now for the cows, who were all awake and so distressed that they were letting off bad smells. His laugh was hollow, the smile on his face made him look like crazed. "Your partner," he spat, ironically.

Ry-anne's steely gazed faltered. She looked down and inspected the barn floor. The dizzying sense of premonition shook her just then. When Markooth had met her at the house, she was the one who suggested they go into the barn. Before, she'd always avoided the place because of the visions it unleashed upon her--visions identical to what had just occurred--but now it seemed right. But it was certainly strange, foreseeing and living snatches of an argument with your Pair that you would only really have Seasons later.

Markooth continued, quieter now. "The very meaning of the word 'partner' is equality. But we would never be equals, you and I, even though I have studied the same magic at the same level as you. Never would we be equals. You would always be the Grand of Glandor and I--well, do they even have a name for partner to the Grand?"

"It's Partner to the Grand," said Ry-anne and wished that she had neither known nor said that.

Markooth uttered a mirthless laugh. "So you see what I mean. But I could live with that, Ry-anne. For the love of you I could do it. But then *you* ask me to Unite! You take even that small tradition, the only male thing I had left to me. So no, I won't be your partner because I could never be that. You would never let me--*you* would always be in control."

Hurt welled up in her throat. Her nose stung and her eyes glimmered with tears that she was too proud to let fall. She shook her hair out of her face and stared straight up at Markooth. "So you don't love me?"

His eyes grew tender. "Oh, I do. Don't even presume to tell me what I feel now -"

"I'm not -!"

"Yes, you are! You always are." Flustered hands covered his face. He massaged his brow-bone.

"Markooth?"

The hands dropped. "What? You can't change my mind, Ry-anne. I can't live my life as secondary. I can't make a mockery of a partnership."

Ry-anne was chilled. Markooth's voice was so flat. Dead. She struggled to keep her voice even when she spoke. "Please don't do this to us -" she failed. Her voice cracked and she bowed her head.

She waited for Markooth to make it all right again. But he just stood there, removed and certain of his decision. The cows shuffled in the distance. One of them had been listening, its head off the ground. It now fell back to the floor, intent on returning to sleep.

"Breaking your heart am I, your highness?" he asked. "Ry-anne, you've done that to me every day of our lives."

Those words sliced her right down the middle. She didn't want to think she was that kind of person, someone who caused pain. "Well you should have told me then, shouldn't you? And I took the last male right away from you, did I? But tell me this, when were you going to ask *me*

to Unite, Markooth? When? It is the opening ceremony tomorrow. The vows ought to have been in place by then--so if you wanted to act like a man you should have done it while there was still chance."

Markooth shook his head. He closed his eyes briefly. "I don't want to fight with you."

"Well I do!"

"For once in your damned -" he raised his hands, curled them into fists and then shook them loose. "For once in your life you're going to listen to me and respect what I want. We are not going to fight about this."

"No it's not." She spoke the same words that she had seen herself say in her visions, many Seasons past. She felt giddy.

"Then we won't talk at all. Good luck at the ceremony next morn." He moved to walk away, to leave her all alone.

"Wait!" she grabbed him, held his wrists and stared into his back. She tried to pull him around to face her but he would not be turned. She eventually gave up and dropped his arm, a great weight of sadness settled over her chest. It was hard to speak. "Will you be there for me this coming morn?"

A rush of air escaped his lungs. A sad sigh? An irritated sigh? "I will be there," he said finally and then moved out of the barn. The doors clanged shut in his wake. It had been an unusually windy eve and some air sneaked into the barn and extinguished her light, leaving her in shocked darkness.

But she cradled a flicker of hope to her. Markooth would be there the next morn. No matter what he had said that eve, she knew he would be there for her. He would help her through the difficult times ahead. He had to. He was her Pair.

* * *

The bells in the quad woke Ry-anne just before dawn. She had barely slept as it was, dreams of a grueling and surreal physical battle with Markooth had infested her night and left her exhausted. In accordance with the rites, Lyelle issued her a measly breakfast of fruit and water, which did nothing to help restore her strength. Her stomach gurgled wistfully, hoping for a cold egg or a square of cake.

But it was not to be. And it would not get any easier either, for today was the introduction to what would soon be a ten day fast. It would be a total fast, too. By the next morn, she would only be allowed water. Whatever problems she would face before the Rise, before Madrea passed her accumulated knowledge on, she would have to surmount using her own mental strength. And she must do that without any outside help, food or guidance. It was the way of the centuries, but Ry-anne still secretly bemoaned it. The fast was a dumb old rule that needed changing.

Lyelle looked shrunken, swathed in her huge loose robes. She was old, Ry-anne realized. Everybody was getting older. It was the way of things, but Ry-anne wished again for the oblivion and innocence of childhood. She wasn't ready for this! Nor would she embrace those itchy, scratchy robes. Reluctantly, she signaled that she was done devouring her breakfast--cores and all--and the Priestess silently beckoned her to follow her out of the long, long meal room.

It was the first time that she had eaten alone in there, she thought. Ordinarily it was full of Family, although Markooth had always taken his meals at his own house. The very thought of him brought fresh, lancing pain. She shoved the feelings away and acknowledged that she had more important things to concentrate on. But wasn't Markooth the most important thing in

her life? Regrettably, no. Her destiny as the Grand, caregiver of Glandor, would always be more important than either herself, Markooth or Lefus. And much more important than love. That was the dictum the Grand had tried to impose on her anyway, but it hadn't seemed to stick. She thought of Lefus again--how would he be feeling now? And Markooth, did he know about her feelings for his brother? Grand it was all such a mess.

Prayers came next and then the Priestess stripped off her common clothes and robed her in coarse straw cloth. Afterwards, they walked through the sleeping house to visit with the Grand. Her bare feet padded across the stone floors.

Even on her deathbed, Ry-anne perceived no real sense of frailty from this woman. Her face was parchment thin and she dribbled from thin lips onto a trembling chin, where black hairs sprouted out of twin moles. Her white hair was lighter than the pillows, as fine as silk and as fragile as rose petals in a vicious gale. Ry-anne thought that if anybody tried to comb that sweet, white hair, it would slip away in handfuls. But although the Grand's onyx black eyes were now a watery grey, they burned with a preternatural fire, a strength that belied her age and the monster that ate her up from the inside out. Attendants dabbed here and there, fussing with potions and pillows until the Priestess waved them out of the room and subsequently left Ry-anne alone with this mighty power.

Madrea, once rotund and physically strong, was now sickly and skinny--a completely different person. But the power still swelled in the room, potent, choking…fearsome. The Grand could no longer speak, but that was not a problem.

You have a difficult task ahead of you, young maiden.

I know this my lady, Ry-anne sent.

You are far too arrogant.

Sadly, I have just been made aware of this too, my lady.

Arrogance is not a sin--it always serves one well to have faith in one's abilities. But you must guard against complacency. In many ways you are naïve; sexually and emotionally. But by far the biggest challenge you will face is one of your own. You do not believe that you are ready or worthy to Rise. Only when you believe that will anything be possible, will you be able to beat any Challenger…will be able to Rise.

Ry-anne considered the Grand's words carefully. They were not to be taken lightly, she knew, but she didn't know what they alluded to. She tucked the advice away for the future.

You know I think you are too young to Rise at this moment, though admittedly that is more my fault than yours .

Yes, my lady, but please be assured that I will try my hardest when the time comes.

Fancy words, fancy words. They move me not, young maiden. Yet I know that you have a useful strength inside you. A core of unflinching granite dwells beneath that flowery, feminine exterior. You just need hardening up.

Thank you, my lady.

Irritation seeped out from Madrea. *I was not finished.*

My apologies.

Now, listen and remember. The life of a Grand is indeed lonely but know this: When you are drowning in the darkness that will plague your coming days, I believe in your strength and I have faith that you would rule Glandor with the perfect balance between heart and head.

Your confidence restores me -

Shh. Now go child, leave an old lady to lament her lost loves and live her last days. The Family awaits your presence.

Ry-anne paused. *Yes, my lady. Thank you for--I mean, I hope -*
Go now.
Goodbye Madrea. Madrea?
Quickly.
I will miss you.
Warmth and annoyance swirled around the room**.** *Oh, I will be around**.** Wait, child.*
Yes?
When you experience the ultimate betrayal, remember what I said just now.

Frowning, Ry-anne nevertheless nodded and padded out of the chamber. Once outside, the attendants filed back into the room and the Priestess motioned for Ry-anne to follow her towards the Great Hall. She attempted to push her hands into the robe's sleeves as the Priestess did, but it just felt strange. Then she tried to place her hands behind her back, thinking that it would look respectful and proper considering for the occasion, but the itchy fabric repulsed her skin. In the end, she awkwardly held her hands by her sides, the soles of her feet getting filthier and filthier on the cold floor. Why she was not allowed to wear sandals she could not comprehend. Tradition.

With an ominous creak, the double oak doors to the Great Hall swung back. The sea of Family was more of a swamp. Nerves made their faces muddy and she could not pick out a familiar, friendly face from the front pews of Family, especially not from the crowd of villagers at the back. Markooth? She felt dizzy as the Priestess led her into position on the side podium and stumbled on the step up. Her cheeks were embarrassingly flushed as she pushed down her hood and shook out her hair. The Priestess fixed her with a painful stare for doing that. Ry-anne tried not to roll her eyes.

You know I think you are too young to Rise at this moment…

The Grand's words echoed about her head, making her blush all the more. Perhaps she shouldn't be here at all?

Then, with a deafening roar like the oceans parting, the few hundred strong gathering stood as one. Ry-anne noticed her closest family right at the front. There was Gamine, Johann, Mallun and Jenn and all her halfies. Grand, even Gwyneth was there, leaning against Davvy. That meant a lot. Pappy Johann looked painfully proud, Ry-anne saw, yet incredibly nervous. She caught Gwyneth's eye and her sister blew her a kiss. Just them being there amongst that maze of people was comforting.

It was then Ry-anne realized that all these people stood for her. And although she had been aware of the details of the ceremony for many Seasons, that thought made her weak at the knees. There was a queer sick feeling at the top of her throat. It burned and she swallowed uncomfortably, certain that the whole congregation could hear her gulp.

The Priestess stood below in the center of the stage and motioned for the people to sit.

When the noise died down, the Priestess began. "We have all come together this morn to witness the first day of the next Rise to Grand. For many Seasons now we have all known that the Fates singled out Ry-anne, birth child of Gamine and Johann, to become the next Grand."

"Hail Madrea, Grand of Glandor," the crowd murmured in unison.

"Even without another Challenger, Ry-anne's Rise will be an extreme test. Having lived so few Seasons, she will soon know more mental and physical trauma in the next ten days than you or I will experience in our entire lives. But as is our custom, we must now ask the Fates whether there is another Challenger to Rise to Grand. After all, Glandor deserves the most worthy of rulers considering that our very survival depends on them."

"Hail Madrea, Grand of Glandor."

"For this reason, let the representatives of the Fates now enter."

Again the people stood as a trio of hooded priests entered the stage from the right.

The Priestess addressed the representatives. "O honest priests, hast thou convened with the Fates of Destiny?"

"We have, your highness," they said as one in a genderless voice.

"Pray tell us, what hast thou heard?"

The holy men did not reply for seven heartbeats--for dramatic effect Ry-anne thought wickedly. Her eyes still searched for Markooth and finally, thank the Grand, she settled on his face. What was he thinking? Was their love in his eyes? Hatred? Regret? She noticed Lefus stood next to him and the shock made her jump visibly. There was too much in his eyes. Ry-anne couldn't look.

"The Fates have deemed there is to be a Challenger," the representatives said, their voices a monotone.

"What?" Ry-anne cried out loud. A muttered curse came instantaneously as all eyes shot to her. The crowd whispered. Shocked.

Lefus' hand covered his mouth, his head shook from side to side. Black eyes found hers. His fear stilled her heart. And Markooth? His head hung lower than his slumped shoulders.

But how do I feel? She wondered. Absurdly, she had no idea. Blood pounded in her head but she forced herself to calm down. The Priestess spoke.

"O worthy priests, pray tell us the name of the one Destiny deems should Challenge."

"The name of the Challenger to the seat of Grand of Glandor is…" Another lengthy pause. Ten heartbeats this time. *Just don't let it be anyone I know,* prayed Ry-anne.

"Markooth of Glandor."

What bitter irony.

Ry-anne rounded on Markooth, trying to gauge his reaction. Had he known about this all along? Is that why he had been behaving so strangely with her last eve? But no, Markooth seemed just as shocked as she. His head shot up, mouth slightly parted. It did not close even when the priests took his arms and propelled him towards the stage. Lefus sat down, fingers tightly gripped the pew before him.

The whispers in the crowd had grown to an almighty roar and the Priestess had to call for silence. Finally, she got it.

"The Fates have spoken and we must accept their decision," she said, when Markooth had been placed next to Ry-anne.

Ry-anne searched his face. His eyes, which would not meet hers, shimmered brightly as he was robed and blessed. Ry-anne was entranced by his hair, how the light fell on it, the shiny patterns it made as he sighed or breathed in and out. She could not tear her eyes away.

When you experience the ultimate betrayal, remember what I said just now...

Had the Grand known this would happen? Desperate, selfish, violent anger rallied inside her still body. Behind the facade of one young maiden's composed expression lay a desire for rebellion, for war.

"…And with respect for this great Kingdom, there can only be one Challenger who will rise to the seat of Grand. The fight begins this next morn--and it will be to the death."

FIVE

Immediately after the ceremony, Markooth took Ry-anne out to the Reds, the woods that marked the periphery of the House's lands. Horses munched on fallow fields, whisked away flies with their tails. Like her Immediates, Lefus had watched her go and had been powerless to fight it. Ry-anne had not been able meet his gaze.

The eve before the first day of battle was customarily a small reprieve. Especially since the whole of Glandor knew that Ry-anne and Markooth were Paired. Traditionally, the short interval before the next sunrise was a time where the Challengers could do whatever they saw fit. It would be the final time the two could ever be together safely.

Markooth had his back to a fence. A few yards behind him a grey stallion snorted, lifted up its tail and dropped a pile of dung. Ry-anne looked over Markooth's shoulder and back towards the House. Night had fallen fast, too fast. The torches were lit and people milled around on their way to evening prayer, eating a little supper before they went or chatting to a cousin or two. Wasn't it terrible that Markooth and Ry-anne must fight? They would say. Aye, but 'tis the will of the Fates would come the reply.

"I can't fight you. I won't." A horrible thought crawled into her head. Don't you want to fight him because you are afraid you will lose? She tried to banish the thought, but it's residue would not quite wash away.

Markooth stood silently. The only sounds around were the distant plucking of a lute, the snippet of a giggle, the songs of prayers. Markooth's sigh…

"Do you hate me as much as you did this last eve?" Ry-anne asked without emotion, but her head twisted upwards to look at him.

His eyes ventured towards hers. Then he rolled his head back with a loud sigh and sat down, elbows on his knees and head in his hands. "By the Fates, Ry-anne, I could never hate you. I only loathe the situation They have put us in." By now the sun had set and the moons had rose and this was the first time he had spoken.

"But you did not want to Unite."

"For my own pride, no, I didn't. But I had no desire to murder you either!" He muttered a heartfelt curse. The words were brutal but true. The reality of their situation made them lapse into silence.

Finally, "Why have they done this to us, Markooth?"

He shook his head. He could not give her an answer to that question. Nobody could.

Ry-anne ripped out a clump of grass, then another--and another. She tore the head off a sugar-daisy. Bashed her fist against the fence. It wobbled, scattering the Grey closest to it. Fired up, she got to her feet and started to kick the fence pole. She hammered it with the heel of her foot, elbowed it, butted her shoulder against it. The pain felt good. Tears came.

"Ry-anne, don't. Ry-anne! Stop it right now--you'll hurt yourself." Hands caught her flailing arms. She wrenched free.

"So what? So *what*, Markooth? You're going to kill me anyway, so what does it matter?"

Arms. A steel embrace. She fought.

"Don't you talk that way, Ry-anne. Come now--this is hard enough!"

She clawed his skin. Drew blood. His flesh stuck up her nails. "And what do you care? You don't even want to be with me anymore!"

The will of his mind knocked her to the earth. She struggled against the invisible hold while Markooth stood over her and watched her efforts fail. She felt too weak to bother struggling. Eventually, she gave in and Markooth drew her into his arms. She felt such sweet, acute joy and conflicting sorrow as she was comforted by the person she loved. By the very person she was supposed to fight to the death starting next morn. Could they really do that to each other? Cause mortal, physical pain? Yet the Fates insisted that they must and it was impossible to argue with Destiny.

Ry-anne poured out warmth, cuddled it to him, and caressed him with feelings. Caught up in her emotions, she did not notice that Markooth did not reciprocate. Lips melted together and tears mingled. She clung to him.

"Let's not do this," she breathed.

Markooth pulled away. Golden eyes gazed downwards, curious. "Not do what? This?" He kissed the tip of her nose.

She started to smile, but then caught herself. What would Lefus think if he saw this? "No. That's not what I mean."

He gave her a grin, which quickly faded. "Then what are you saying?"

"Only what you must have been thinking too. Why should Fate drive our lives, Markooth? We are individuals, not cattle. For too many Seasons my life has been ruled by Destiny. But no more, not when it interferes with you. You're more important to me than Glandor--the House--everything. You're my *Pair* for Grand's sake!"

For a moment, Markooth looked touched. A delicate emotion flickered in his eyes, but then it was gone. Now he looked earnest. "More important to you than the seat of Glandor, than the safety of the Family--of me?"

"Yes! I mean…wait…" A sigh. "You're confusing me on purpose."

"I'm just trying to make you think, Ry-anne. And what of Lefus?"

Her eyes slid over to his unflinching gaze. "What of him?"

He closed his eyes and exhaled. "I just want to know how you feel towards him…before next morn happens. It's important."

She frowned. "He's my trainer." It felt like a betrayal.

"Ry-anne -"

She growled and pounded her thighs once with both her fists. Markooth soothed her with an illicit, intimate massage of the neck. She could smell honey spice again. All throughout those many Seasons that they had been Paired, it had always been Markooth who had said no. "We should wait until the Union," he would say. And then Ry-anne would tease him for being so presumptuous. Had he planned the clothes he would wear too? The flowers he would give her? Whereupon Markooth would retreat and go the color of a beautiful sunset and Ry-anne would regrettably relent. She sighed inwardly. Deeply. That time seemed so far gone now. They could never experience such innocence again.

But now, here on the damp grass, as the moon Guardians glowered down and the eve steadily inched towards that fateful morn, it was Markooth who elicited intimacy. If they were found out and the Judiciary became involved, then for a high Pairing such as Ry-anne and

Markooth, it would mean social exclusion. Markooth didn't touch like Lefus, didn't excite the same spark and shiver that he did. But she reasoned that was because she was so accustomed to Markooth, whilst Lefus was still an enigma. Would Lefus hate her if he knew what she allowed Markooth to do, what she suddenly, overwhelmingly wanted to do with Markooth? Or would he understand in some way that this was their final fateful eve together?

You're bad, Ry-anne, she told herself. *You're morally wrong and you shouldn't be the Grand of Glandor. You should stop this physical touching before it goes too far, again.* But Ry-anne felt ruthless, rebellious even. After what the Fates had done to her life, she was in no mood to preach about the Rules.

She caught Markooth's face in both her hands and pressed her lips to his. His mouth was paradise, a secret escape from their problems, meant only for her. *No more rules*, she thought and placed gentle kisses around the private crevice of his throat, as she unbuttoned the restraints down the side of his robe. He pulled away.

"Don't do that," he muttered, tugging the cloth away.

But Ry-anne rarely listened to him and now was no different. Markooth grew angry. It was only when she felt the hot lash of anger that she realized it was the first mental touch he had given. Markooth had not covered her in love, like she had done for him. Had not tickled her with tender thoughts. Why?

A cold wave of dread soaked her through and through, until the marrow of her bones felt frozen solid and there was no warmth left in her entire body. With the force of her mind, she tore the cloth away, and there was the symbol she most dreaded.

"A spell?" she said, broken with hurt. Looking into those golden eyes that were more familiar than her own, Ry-anne saw a look she had never seen before. The eyes were now cold and hard. They were cruel.

Markooth leaned away. He did not deny it. Worse, he did not seem at all concerned that he had been found out.

Ry-anne took in the silver wishbone design painted on Markooth's chest. Silver on tan. Spidery, delicate, but there. It was turned upside down into the shape of a small "N" and beside it was a fly-sized drawing of a rose. The drawing, a tattoo that could never be removed, symbolized that Markooth had wished her to love him and the intent was not good, or the wishbone would have been painted the right way up.

So there was her betrayal, staring her in the face, under the phosphorescent glow of twin moons. Taunting her.

"You put me under a spell, Markooth? You used magic to make me love you--what--why? For how long? For all of our Pairing?" She was frozen, and though she wanted to beat the truth out of him, it was impossible to. Her chest heaved but still she could not grab enough air.

Markooth's gaze was indifferent.

The certainty that he could not explain this away, that their Pairing would now be irrevocably severed hit her like a death. How could she have been so blind? Then, the truth of Markooth's actions, of why he had put her under a spell suddenly dawned. Her breath stopped a beat.

She put out an accusatory finger, which trembled from anger. "You did this so I wouldn't want to fight you, didn't you? So that you would not have to fight *me*? How long have you really known that you would be the second Challenger? You want the seat of the Grand for yourself, don't you? And you thought that I would abandon my calling because I could not bear to harm the one I loved?"

"You would have abandoned it," he said. His voice was low and deep, sure of itself, like a grumble of thunder. It was almost a sneer.

He wounded her with that crushing absence of warmth in his face or voice or look. What made it more painful was that he was right. She could not have fought him on the morrow. She was dying to hit out at him, to fling him into the woods and hurt him like he hurt her. But she sucked in a breath and stood up straighter.

"Well now I know the truth, don't I? That everything I feel--*felt*--for you was a lie! So if you want the seat of the Grand, then you will have to fight me spit and blood for it." Her words came out through clenched teeth and with that, she left him in the forest and walked the distance back to the House. Every time sadness threatened to overwhelm her, she reminded herself of the pain Markooth had caused, of the anger she now felt towards him. Soon, sadness transformed into something else entirely. All that remained was hatred and determination. With each step back towards the house and Destiny, Ry-anne felt her resolve grow stronger. She *would* claim the seat of the Grand.

* * *

When Ry-anne returned to her chamber there was a note pushed under the door. Her heart leapt, betraying her. She hoped it would be an apology from Markooth. Or maybe Lefus wanted to see her. But no, it was from Gwyneth, and Ry-anne chided herself for letting down her guard.

In dark times, the note made her smile. It read thus:

Dear Sister

I came to visit but found you gone. If you are in need of counsel then see me--I would not mind.

Thinking of you and praying that the Great Grand's past will give you the necessary strength to come through this seemingly impossible situation.

I have naught but faith in you, sweet sister.

Gwyneth xx

Ry-anne refolded the note exactly as it had been and placed it under her pillow, so that in some way, Gwyneth would be there as she slept. But sleep was for later. There were still hours in the night fit for study. And there was one spell in particular that she wished to brush up on. Perhaps the only thing that would give her the edge over Markooth. A spell the Grand had passed on, many Seasons past.

* * *

Only when she sensed the dawn approach did Ry-anne wearily re-close the books and crawl into bed. Only then did she allow herself to feel the stomach pains, which clamored for food. Tossing over, she tried to think of something else. But all that came to mind was Markooth. Questions spun. If he did not really love her, why then had he been so upset that she had asked for a Union the previous night? How could she have mistaken the tenderness in his eyes, the very real anguish he seemed to feel when it was announced he should challenge? It didn't all make sense.

Then suddenly it did. In the worst way. It seemed to Ry-anne that most of their whole Pairing could have been a fraud. That Markooth had always played her a fool. Last eve was the prime example. He had made her miserable by voluntarily annulling their Pairing, that if he should show her any affection--like he had this eve--then of course she would cling to it. She'd be so desperate for them to be together that she'd do anything…like giving up the right to challenge for the seat of Grand.

Or was she just sleep befuddled? And surely sweet, gentle Markooth was not so devious as that? Ry-anne pulled the bedroll over her face. She would not sleep like this. It took great strength of mind to shut down that part of the brain that wanted to continually sieve through the past eve's events, Lefus' kiss and his *I love you*…Markooth's spell. But finally, she drifted off.

Ry-anne did not hear the bells and Lyelle had to wake her.

"You are late, child," said the Priestess unnecessarily.

"I apologize your highness. I worked late into the night." Ry-anne hastily shot out of bed and attempted to robe in the same garment as last eve.

"No. You will wear the ceremonial robe this morn," said the Priestess, who held out a dress of white silk emblazoned with the symbol of the Grand; the everlasting ball of red fire that must always be tended and never extinguished.

"Yes, your highness." Ry-anne dove into the robe and the Priestess hurriedly escorted her to the battle hall. The long walk through the House and out through the unusually deserted quad was a chance to gather her thoughts. She tried to remember her breathing and remain calm. It was hard, however, given that it seemed she was being escorted to her own execution.

Markooth was already there. Ry-anne cursed inwardly. She should have been first--it made an impression. The battle room was a huge rectangle the size of the horses' grazing fields. Only Family and a few honored villagers from representative areas had crowded in. By sight she recognized a couple from Ricefield and Pantherea. They fit around the four sides like a higgledy-piggledy line of soldiers.

Markooth stood in the center. Those familiar golden eyes held no welcome, showed no remorse about their situation. They were without emotion. Heartless. Ry-anne avoided his challenging gaze. She must not let him rile her. The love spell might still be at work and she knew that if she felt any anguish during this first fight then it was only a false feeling.

Ry-anne walked alone to the center of the floor. Her bare feet padding over the polished wood were the only sounds in the hall apart from a few nervous coughs, shuffles of the feet and sneezes. She spotted Gwyneth, Johann and Gamine. Their presence calmed her, even though there was no time to acknowledge them. Her eyes hoped for somebody else, too. And finally she found him. Lefus stood like a man in agony as her eyes rested on him for a touch too long.

The Priestess began to speak. "And now the worthy will do battle to judge who is the most deserving of the seat of the Grand. If one will fall today then the standing Challenger will be named Grand. If nobody falls this whole day you shall both fight again the next morn and the next morn until only one remains. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your highness," said Ry-anne. Her voice sounded surprisingly clear and strong in the large room.

Markooth, his eyes trained on Ry-anne, nodded once, deeply.

The mood in the hall was strange. The time of the Rise was always both exciting and anticipatory--a cause for festival. But always was it one of great sadness too. For it was when the current Rise, who had cared and protected the land for a generation, passed over. And this time there was added sorrow because the Challengers were Paired. Little did the Family or the village

folk know about their recent rupture.

"Ready?" Lyelle asked.

Ry-anne sucked in a deep breath. Now it was her eyes that fixed on Markooth, while he looked over her head. "I am, your highness." She said, watching him. He gave another slow, sure nod.

"Take the positions."

On the Priestess' mark, Ry-anne and Markooth flew into the air. Markooth, of course, beat her up there. Facing each other, they hovered a head's distance from the ceiling, the eyes of the Family below staring up at them. They waited for the Priestess' signal to begin. Ry-anne could hear her own breath. Markooth was so close she could feel his heat, smell the sweat and the nostalgic scent of honey spice. That smell, which spoke of innocent times and long talks behind the barn in the candlelight, caused her great pains. He had not shaved today, she noticed absurdly.

Markooth's eyes were on her now, the pupils dilated in the dark room. It was incredibly hard to be greeted with hostility and not warmth. She tried not to bite her lip.

"Begin."

The signal from the Priestess made Ry-anne inhale sharply. She hadn't expected it. Immediately, Markooth struck out. Ry-anne's body hurtled towards the wall behind her. Panicking, she scraped together a cushion, slowed time and movement -

- and avoided the collision.

There were gasps and sighs of relief from the crowd below.

Ry-anne shifted her position in the air so that she was straight up once again. Markooth prepared another attack. She must do the same. The problem was, as Pairs they had sparred together so often during the Seasons over many trivial arguments that they knew each other's movements by heart. This fight was going to be difficult.

Ry-anne blocked the force Markooth sent out, sent it back in his direction doubled with her own power. She dropped quickly--moved to the right--so that he could not easily deflect it back at her.

It hit! Markooth slammed back against the wall. The mounted torches wobbled, flames flickering. The gathering made sympathetic noises. Ry-anne felt their pain. It ripped her apart to harm Markooth, but she had to keep thinking -- *the spell, the spell. None of my feelings are real.* With renewed vigor, she flew through the air towards him--the walls a blur--intending to puncture his chest with a slice of power. She would pin him to the wall until he gave in.

Markooth shifted out of her way easily, caught her neck with an invisible hand and whipped her around. He pressed her body to the wall. Some of her hair stuck in her mouth. She choked, spluttering, trying to get it out as her sharp breaths sucked the dry hair further into her throat. Markooth's grip tightened and Ry-anne's face started to feel fatter with blood. She concentrated, managed to hold him off, then fought back the grip he had on her until she could breathe more easily. She sensed the crowd's nervousness, having expected Ry-anne to be the favorite.

"Get off me!" Ry-anne gurgled and flung off Markooth's grip, wishing she could waste the time to massage her throat.

She was away in a flash, zipping around Markooth's back. He twisted in a blink, graceful as ever. "Don't think it's going to be that easy!"

His words lanced through her and made her wince. But she steeled herself and thought of the spell, rationalizing that if she had no feelings for this man then this shouldn't be so hard. She

unleashed a barrage of blows. One--two--three. They knocked him back. Blood gushed from his nose, dripping into his mouth as she drove a mental uppercut that flung his head backwards. A sore-looking bruise formed on his cheek.

But Ry-anne was not done. She imagined she turned side on to him and her mind made it real. Then she jammed his stomach with a kick. She saw the damage with her own eyes and Markooth folded over, spat blood. Whether it was the blood from his nose or whether he bled internally, she did not know.

It was then she made a deadly mistake. She paused for a split second. Repenting. Torn apart for each blow, each agony she had caused the Pair she loved.

"Oh, Markooth," she spoke aloud, when she had meant only to say it in her head.

His eyes snapped on her instantly. He was hard to read, bloodied and halfway across the room. But then an unmistakable emotion prowled over his face. His eyes narrowed and Ry-anne knew that she was being stalked. She tried to rush up the barriers but he was too quick. He flew forwards, covered the distance in a blink and an invisible cage held her arms.

Ry-anne grunted, struggling. "No, don't…do -"

Her throat had frozen. She spluttered, sounding ridiculous.

"You said you would fight me spit and blood, Ry-anne," he growled. His breath came out in spurts, puffed her sweat damp hair out of her face and cooled her skin. He spat in her face and Ry-anne felt it trickle down the side of her cheek.

How could you?

"Well there's the spit," Markooth said. Then he took a finger and wiped up some of the blood from his nose, smearing it across his sweat-dripping face.

He looks like an animal, Ry-anne thought. She cringed when he wiped the blood across her frozen, half-open lips. Some trickled in. She tasted copper.

"And there's the blood. But tell me, *Ry*, where's the fight?"

Ry-anne *did* fight. It was like a mental tug of war. Markooth exerted incredible, devastating force on her and she instinctively shoved back with all her might, as if she were physically trying to push the whole House to the other side of Glandor. All thought or knowledge of the crowd below had vanished. All that existed now was this single effort not to die. And that effort exhausted her. Her sodden robes stuck to her weary body. Fighting for her life was bad enough, but now she struggled frantically not to be murdered by her closest love. It broke her heart.

If Markooth's grip got any tighter then her essence would surely be pushed out of its body.

Enough! I give!

Markooth's face changed. Gone was the sneer, replaced by surprise and something else that she could not define.

Finish me, the seat is yours.

After a moment, Markooth drifted close enough to kiss. It was bittersweet.

Finish me, love. I have no fight left. You broke me. You win.

Markooth hesitated just a moment too long. And Ry-anne vanished--her body faded until it was no longer there. It took her last ounce of strength and courage to do it--she did not like traveling blind and senseless--it was more disconcerting than her first sojourn into the air when she was in her small seasons.

Ry-anne could not see or hear anybody's reactions. This morn, she could not even imagine what Markooth's would be, though a couple of eve's ago she would have been certain. The crowd, she bet, was astonished, gossiping, gesturing wildly. The kiddies would be jumping up and down

with glee. Some screeching perhaps.

Not many people had ever mastered this trick, and Ry-anne was glad she had worked on it alone, albeit sullenly at first, per the Grand's advice.

Before she left, Ry-anne projected her voice into the air. "I will return." The words would come out huge and echoey, she knew, bouncing around the huge ceiling. People would be awed, perhaps disappointed in her too. They would wonder whether to give Markooth the seat.

Ry-anne remembered the Grand's words: *A core of unflinching granite dwells beneath that flowery, feminine exterior. You just need hardening up*. And it was true. Ry-anne was not yet strong enough to defeat the man she had been made to love. But she had to be, must be, because dear, corrupt Markooth could not be allowed to gain power over Glandor and its people. If he did then the evil that had stolen Kyna, robbed Lefus of Marlena, destroyed Pantherea town and assaulted Markooth's own mother would reign. She could not and would not allow that.

SIX

It was the Dimension of the Dead. And even with her sorely depleted resources, she had doggedly covered her tracks. Markooth could not find her here. Few people ever dared venture into this Dimension. Yet time fell away unnoticed here and she must guard against that. She had nine days to prepare for the final battle and must linger no longer.

It wasn't really true to say that it was cold, for it was both senseless and imageless, a sea of lost or discarded souls. But it was so lonely that it felt cold.

The life of a Grand is lonely…

Ry-anne tried to hug herself but it was hard in this place, where there was no feeling. She needed time to recover, for her wounds to repair and her strength to return. But it was hard not to feel removed from it all in this place, and it was all too tempting to remain and never give another care as to who Rose to the seat of the Grand. She needed time to think about whether she was even suitable for the task. At that moment, she felt less than adequate. Markooth would probably fare much better than she anyway...

Consciousness again--a collected stream of thoughts. Sometimes her sense of self went away, but it was back now. Something was important. Something she must remember. There was something to do. But not her. She could not, would not. Easy here. Relax. Breathe. No more pressure. Something coming…

Not good enough, was the next thought. She was swimming somewhere. So lonely it was cold. *The life of a Grand is lonely*…How right you were Madrea. A strange, not wet not dry, sea of depression and bad mood. She ached. *My heart is a mere piece of parchment, torn to shreds and flung into the wind, left at the mercy of the elements.* No room for hearts in the seat. She hurt--*he* had hurt her. But she didn't want to remember, wanted to stay here where it was lonely, safe, uncaring…

Pain pierced the darkness. Yet she could not see. There was no dark. No light either. A chasing feeling. Fear. Something searching for her. There was someone there. Looking. No, hunting…

You must move Ry-anne!

Urgency made her heartless heart flutter.

Although she could not see, she sensed a light. A black light. Blood red sparkles through the oceans of the dead. Danger. She knew she had to move! How?

Twists and turns. Inside and out. The thing still hunted her. *Hide and seek we play but there is no game here.* This is life. Death. She will be dead. She moved but it clung to her spirit. A fear-seeking presence. A destroyer. But why should she not be destroyed? Why *must* she not?

Because she wanted to live. She was running away because she didn't want to die, didn't want to be found. She wanted to live!

When you are drowning in the darkness…

Yes, I am drowning. I have no breath but I don't want to die!

…that will plague you in coming days, I believe in your strength…

I have strength?

It is near! She zipped again, evading. She knew these crevices. You may have mastered my trick demon, but I know these crevices, I will beat you.

A vision. A picture of Gwyneth. Beautiful sister in exquisite agony. It is he!

A life edges towards the Dimension of the Dead. Sister's toes dip into the water, her hair grows wet. She is coming here! She is dying and it is he, Markooth, that murders her.

NO.

…you would rule Glandor with the perfect balance between heart and head.

Yes.

* * *

Blind, deaf, and senseless, Ry-anne felt her way back from the bottom of the ocean of the dead. She rose towards the light -- shore, dry land, and sense.

An image of her home. Her heart ached. Glandor is a forgotten land now. A world fallen to the power of the Otherworld. Fires rage. They burn the lovingly built huts, villagers cry and scream as they are roasted alive. Demons walk the earth. Pillage. Destroy. Kill. Madrea? She is too weak…or gone?

Markooth is responsible for this!

The wind blew a false and formidable gale. Her hair is being torn, tugged. The skies are leaden and prophesize doom. Lightening stabs the black, illuminating a sad world. Her world! She flew quickly, dashing through magic storm clouds, tearing their stuffing as she went. Rain fell like tears, drowning. But the water was not real--not like the sea of the dead. It is good to breathe, to be alive. There will be no more running from things.

Gwyneth is in the battle hall. Invisible, Ry-anne hurries in, sensing Markooth's inflated and powerful presence. She must work fast. Scattering Family look on in horror as Gwyneth is pinned to the bolted doors, veins pop in her forehead. Her teeth are bared in pain. People are crying, clutching furiously at each other. Only Johann tugs at her invisible captor.

"Get off her you demon!" he screams over and over again.

"I agree," Ry-anne's voice echoed around the hall, and unseen, she took hold of her sister's mind and hurries her away to the Dimension of the Dead. Markooth, she is sure, will follow her deep into the sea of souls.

"Gwyneth…Sister? How do you feel?"

A moan. "Mm. Strange. My voice sounds…funny."

"You're not really speaking."

"No?" Fear is evident in her voice. "I can't see you. I want to hug you but…I can't feel my arms."

"No. This is not a normal place. It is far away and yet too close to be truly safe. I thought you would be tumbling in here too early. Markooth…"

"He hurt you." There was pain in the voice.

Ry-anne felt a slow surge of hot anger. "Yes. And he was hurting you too. He won't do it again."

"What? No -" Gwyneth's mind leapt with fear. "Something's in here."

"I feel it too."

"What is it?"

"We're being hunted."

"We must leave soon, sister. Our beloved Madrea has passed and the dimension is unguarded. Things--evil things--have started to get in. But you are the one who must Rise. This is your Destiny, not Markooth's."

"Madrea? But I ought to have felt her passing."

Gwyneth experimented tentatively, becoming emboldened. She mentally shook Ry-anne. "Wake up, sister. Our world is dying and we need you! Do not abandon us again."

That hurt. "I will return. Wait -" Ry-anne listened…felt. "We must move. Quick, sister! They're upon us!"

Ry-anne tugged Gwyneth with her. They darted through a murk they could not envision. Evil red lights sparkled in their wake. Chasing them.

"They are gaining!"

Shh.

The two of them slowed to a halt. Hidden. Lights flickered past. Ry-anne trembled, sensing Gwyneth do the same. "Wait here," Ry-anne ordered. "I will check."

Gwyneth was reluctant, but did not argue. "Ry-anne look out!"

Ry-anne twisted about, face to face with a gang of black lights. They seemed to be grinning, enjoying the thrill of the hunt. Behind them, Gwyneth shone in the blackness, twinkling like safe green stars. She must not be harmed. A red light went for her.

Ry-anne engulfed it, extinguished it's light. It burned within her, searing her insides. Evil leaked into Ry-anne's essence, corrupting like acid. But there it was transformed by good. She spotted another red light. It sparkled in the dead black ocean. Afraid because of the pain of the last, Ry-anne gathered her courage and consumed it's light, juddering from the burn. She shrieked through the deadness. Her heart was bursting, body wracked with spasms of electric pain.

A green swish of light. Glittering. Gwyneth! "Ry-anne! Another one!" The green light bumped an evil mass of red going for Ry-anne. The green light flickered red, faltering, but shone out bright once more.

"Are you all right?"

Gwyneth, shaken. Breathless. "Yes, I believe--another! Move Ry-anne!"

Ry-anne blazed towards her sister, scooping her, dragging her away from the final two lights. Menace ate up the distance between them and the only place left to go was up. They swam upwards, away from the devilish tangle and emerged in Glandor.

Both in their real, physical forms, the two sisters automatically glanced behind them. Gwyneth's fair cheeks were blistered, her hair slightly frazzled from the impact with the evil. Ry-anne did not want to know what she herself looked like. Hopefully, it would heal. With time. *Time runs short on this matter.*

"The red lights will be coming soon, won't they?" Gwyneth asked.

"Yes," Ry-anne nodded, surveying the damage of their darkened home. "Take my hand, we'll finish this."

Gwyneth put her fingers in Ry-anne's palms.

A blink and they were inside of the battle room again. The doors had been battered open from the inside out and the room was devoid of people, ransacked. There was blood on the floor and bodies of the dead.

Ry-anne set Gwyneth down on the floor. "Find a safe place to hide. This will all be over soon."

Gwyneth nodded and hurried away. When she was gone, Ry-anne closed her eyes and called for Markooth, her Pair.

Markooth's essence registered shock. He appeared just as fast and they rose to their positions, facing each other as they did at the beginning of their first battle.

Ry-anne looked upon the face of her love and saw only a murderer, a destroyer. Markooth, the sweet boy, the gentle man who taught her to ride and perfect her clumsy mentals. Shy Markooth who blushed so when she teased him. But then she hardened. Her jaw clamped down hard. That Markooth was irreplaceable, gone. Lost to her. Perhaps he never was.

…leave an old lady to lament her lost loves…

Her eyes never left his as she enunciated her words. "I *will* fight you spit and blood, my love." Madrea's words echoed in her ears.

…by far the biggest challenge you will face is one of your own.

"And this time," she said, with all surety. "I will kill you."

…You do not believe that you are ready, worthy to Rise. Only when you believe that, will anything be possible, will you be able to beat any Challenger, will you Rise.

Ry-anne darted out mentally. From a distance her mind gripped Markooth's neck, wormed its way through his chest and dove for his heart. The agony showed in his beautiful golden eyes, which now watered in pain. Ry-anne flew towards him. They were close. Close enough that Ry-anne could wipe the tears from his face, that she could feel his hampered breathing. If she felt so inclined, she could reach out and touch him, sooth the grimace of pain from his face and kiss away his tears. But she didn't.

Through sheer will she squeezed harder. His eyes bulged. Her heart was breaking--bursting--and she cried inside although she tried to stay dead. An image of Gwyneth pinned to the wall helped spur the final anger and she whipped Markooth around towards the main window, flinging him and herself through the exploding glass.

Glass tinkled musically to the pavement. Outside it poured with rain and Ry-anne dropped Markooth from the height of the house. His small body landed with a bounce, his hoarse scream ripping her ears. But she had to get through this. The wind fought her, brutally ripped at her soiled gown and held her back, but Ry-anne willed herself down. Rain roared down like icicles, stabbed her cheeks, eyes, and arms, hiding secret tears. Her hair plastered to her head, her robe glued to her skin.

Markooth did not move. Only his eyes were alive, but just barely. His lips were bright red from the blood the force of the landing had spluttered up. Rain washed it away, as if making him clean of his sins.

Steeling her will, Ry-anne forced herself to finish what she had set out to do. With trembling hands, she blinked through the rain and leaned forward. Her hands were scarred, bloodied with thousands of tiny cuts. She looked beyond her own hands, towards Markooth's neck.

And then she saw it. Markooth's robe was open so that the silver wishbone and rose design was visible.

The rain washed it away.

"No," she whispered.

She reached out, not daring to breath, and touched the small image. Some of the ink came away on her fingers. She rubbed the color between her fingertips. Cold dread gripped her. She could not feel the beat of the rain or the raging wind. All she could feel was overwhelming grief.

"Tell me what this means?" her voice was high and tight. She vaguely sensed that villagers

and Family had begun to crowd around the scene, though none of that mattered now. None of it.

Markooth did not have to speak -- the words from a long ago conversation came unbidden to her own ears.

…I know that you have a useful strength inside you. A core of unflinching granite dwells beneath that flowery, feminine exterior. You just need hardening up…

"You just need hardening up," Ry-anne said softly, under her breath.

…leave an old lady to lament her lost loves…

"O Madrea. Is this what you went through, too?" Ry-anne covered her face with her hands and sobbed. On her knees, she raised her hands as supplicant, begging. "Was there not some other way? Why must the Fates have put us through this?…we…we're *Pairs*! Some other way--there must have…must have been."

Markooth tried to speak. Ry-anne lowered her hands and stared at the horror of what she had done to him. His right leg had landed beneath him, crumpled. Excruciating. And his neck was at an odd angle, but he looked upon her with true love.

And that killed her.

"No…other way," his voice was broken. Just like his body.

"Oh Markooth, you musn't talk--we'll make you well again--there must be a way!" Tears blurred her vision.

"No. Destiny. I…I…made you strong. Hardened. Gra -" he broke off, spluttered. His eyes twisted shut in pain as he hacked up blood, squeezing out tears. His voice was hoarse and barely audible when he next spoke. "Granite. Worth…thy of…seat. Dest-i-ny entw--tw…entwined."

That was his last breath.

Ry-anne stared for a few heartbeats. She waited, hoped, prayed for him to breath again, for the eyes to come back to life. But nothing happened. He had not even really struggled.

She fell onto him and cried out her pain, body wracked with sobs.

Damn the Grand! she screamed to anybody who cared. *I don't want the seat--I just want him back I want him to hold me I want -!*

A comforting blanket of warmth enveloped her crouched figure. Her bones felt good again. The pain in her heart and soul ebbed to an ache. Her tears dried. Confused, Ry-anne sat back on her heels and looked around.

"Markooth? Is that you?" By now people whispered, shuffled from foot to foot, probably wondering if they should leave. But she didn't care. "Markooth?"

The warmth increased and love poured back into her heart. Ry-anne whimpered. "O Grand! It's him--it's you Markooth…It's you." Another voice filled her mind. The strength almost overpowered her. She choked. But something else, something that had not been there before.

Peace.

That boy sacrificed his heart, life and soul for you, young maiden. The Fates decreed his role in this tragedy and he played it well, for the love of Glandor. And for the love of you. He wanted you to be the best Grand you could possibly be. And you will Ry-anne, you will.

"But why? Why did I need tragedy in my life to make me a worthy Grand--why did Markooth have to die? It makes no sense, Madrea. None at all. It's not fair."

Destiny. Fate. Call it what you will. To rule well a deserving Grand needs a healthy balance between heart and mind. But the answers will come in time. The anger will fade. It will never leave you, but it will fade. Amusement seeped into the ambient. *I sense your disbelief. But I will be here to guide you and help you through the coming seasons. Told you I would be around, did I not?*

Madrea's words brought a faint smile to Ry-anne's lips. "Yes, you did," she said quietly.

And so will Markooth. Do you feel him yet?

Hopeful, eager, Ry-anne cast out and searched for him. A physical blush came to her cheek as an invisible warmth caressed her face. She put one hand to her face and felt the heat. There was the faint smell of honey spice. She smiled, and this time it reached her eyes. She bit her lip and her smile shone.

And now Ry-anne, you must Rise. Are you ready to receive the knowledge of Grands generations and centuries past?

"I am."

Good. Warmth and approval embraced her. *Markooth will give it to you.*

Love and fear and pain and beauty and power flowed into her. It was like waking from a sleep, like seeing from being blind, like coming back to life. Ry-anne rolled back her head and gazed upon the sky. The rain stopped, the clouds clearing, and a golden light looked down upon her, winking bright.

At that moment, she had never felt closer to Markooth.

Her eyes shone and she stood and looked around at what were now *her* people, *her* Glandor, *her* responsibility. One other thing became clear as the knowledge settled into place. The vision of Markooth reigning Glandor like a tyrant and attacking Gwyneth was just that--a vision.

It had to be done, Madrea sent. *It was the only way you would surface from the Dimension of the Dead. If we had not given you these images, it may have kept you forever. Without you to protect Glandor, your visions would surely have become reality.*

One face stood out from the crowd of people. Lefus. He crouched beside his brother's body, weeping.

Time runs short in this matter, Markooth sent softly, feeling close.

Ry-anne's confusion muddied the air. *I don't understand.*

I may have left it too late to reconcile with the people I care about, but you don't have to. I meant what I said in the barn Ry-anne. I want to know how you feel about Lefus. It's important, because…

What?

I want to know that you will love and be loved.

Ry-anne sighed and tears pricked her eyes. *I will Markooth,* she sent. *I have you.*

Again she focused on Lefus. She moved closer and took his hand.

…the perfect balance between heart and head…

For the first time in her life, Ry-anne did not feel overwhelmed by what Destiny had in store for her.

The End

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 31

Sentegor sighed, standing beside the large dockworker, looking up into the heavens with him as he spoke. "I heard a voice."

"Yes. What did it say?"

"Two things."

Petravor nodded affirmation for just an instant before looking skyward again.

"The days of Wrath are at the doors," Sentegor said. "I know this now."

Petravor nodded. "I feel it too."

" . . . And you are to return to the city of Zorl and warn all who will come to leave. They are to come out with only enough food and supplies to last them seven days. They are to bring no weapons."

Petravor looked at him suddenly—startled.

"We won't need them," the boy prophet said evenly. "My friend, will you lead the others back to bring all who will follow out with you?"

"I will not leave you."

"I am called another way," Sentegor said after a moment. "It is a way I must go alone."

"What of your mission to warn the True Ones? Is that not our goal, now? Did the voice of the dream say this, or is it just you?"

Sentegor flushed at the allegation. The voice of his dream had said nothing of that, but if he was to follow what he had just seen as well as heard in his dream as a literal vision of events to come, he knew that what lay ahead for him was for him alone. "It makes no difference whether the True Ones know. They are in the hands of the Creator. He will provide a way for them to do their work. This thing I do know, and I also know that I am called another way, and I must go alone," he repeated simply.

"As you wish," Petravor said after a time. "Can you tell me anything?"

"I tell you this much. The prophecy of the judge who would prepare the way for the True Ones coming said also that he would stand above all and protect them. Is this not so?"

"It is."

"I go to fulfill that part of the prophecy, now."

Petravor quickly held out his depolarizer, but Sentegor shook his head no. "The Creator shall preserve me as well."

"Where do you go?"

In answer, Sentegor turned his face to Markeeome. Petravor turned to follow his gaze. It was then that they saw the dark fighters drop from nothingness into the skies above them. There was an oppressive gloom that fell over Sentegor the moment he saw them. There must have been twenty of them, perhaps more—dark, silent craft that were both sleek and simultaneously hideous. They glided as on glass, disappearing behind the clouds of Markeeome. Moments later, Sentegor and Petravor regarded each other.

"I go," Petravor said simply and immediately began rousing the others. Sentegor left them quietly, making his way on up the road of the gods toward the mountain behind which the dark vessels of gloom had disappeared. After just a little time, he quickened his pace.

I I

The walls of the Nebo pooled open before Reeber and the others, revealing the ship's

heart—a room of scintillating white radiance surrounding a hovering cube of crystal turning slowly at its precise center. The cube looked to be two meters by two meters by two meters in size.

"The Chamber of Lights," Kishkor said as a matter of fact. "Oreb and I found it a few days ago. It is as father said it would be."

"Look a this," Oreb ran to the shimmering cube of light, but Reeber's eyes had moved across the rest of the chamber. There seemed to be no walls here. Stars shone everywhere about, not unlike the interior of the great temple back on the Old World, where the Nebo had materialized after its eons-long sleep. Here, in this room, it was as though they stood in a cool night whose sky above and around them was deep and real and endless. Except for the stars, all the light of the room seemed to come from the turning cube.

Reeber looked further around him.

Floating just to his right and behind him was a cabinet of glass-clear crystal, its doors closed—locked while a faint illumination pooled down on its contents from somewhere out of sight above and yet inside it. Beyond the cabinet, some distance away at the edge of what seemed to be a thicket of trees, Reeber saw a bed and other living accommodations. He looked back at the cabinet again.

It held strangely ethereal-looking objects. Reeber walked across the glass-floored chamber to look into the cabinet. Inside floated two, pure white belts with twelve rectangular crystal studs adorning the buckles in three rows of four. Besides these belts, Reeber saw two sets of small, polished glass-like stones mounted in bows that attached to one another, almost like old seeing glasses. Next to these a set of folded robes, like the one Reeber wore beneath his cloak, glowed and hovered motionless. Reeber then saw a crystalline hand weapon held within a gray holster. Next to this, a sealed box of pluridium glowed ever so slightly with a dim lavender aura.

"Those are for the Warriors of Light," Oreb said running over, pushing his face up against the glass of the case doors to look inside.

"And for the final days," Kishkor added."

"I know," Oreb said, not looking away from the case. "I was going to say that." After a moment, he turned and looked up at Reeber. "What you want is over here."

The cube of light turned slowly in the center of the room. Morse stood close to it, looking inside. He reached out suddenly and touched it, stopping it. The light fell away immediately, revealing a row of crystal controls at one of the corners. Morse moved his hands across them.

"Just like the Treasure," he muttered quietly as Reeber came up next to him. The cube faces now shone what seemed to be an image. Each side presented the same scene. As Reeber squinted at it, he suddenly recognized what he saw. It was the bridge of the Vanguard Cygnus. Morse reached for the row of crystals and touched one of them. Instantly, they could hear the crew of the Vanguard talking and the sounds of the great starship.

"Is this where the Holy Man and the Infidel are?" Reeber asked, stepping forward. Morse shook his head. "It's time for me to go back."

"But the Holy Man and the Infidel?"

"When I have gone through, look inside here. It will reveal things."

Reeber shook his head. How did he know these things? Then, he thought he understood. Of course. The Nebo was one of the vessels of light. It shared its technological roots with those of the Vanguards. But what did this cube do beside show things?

Morse hesitated for a moment, then reaching around his waist, undid the holster and hand weapon he wore. When it was free, he turned to Reeber. "Take this. You may need it."

"What? No, sir! I don't use weapons—don't believe in them! A lot of foolery for someone like me . . ."

"Take it, Clement. You may need it."

"But I don't know how . . ."

"You will know how if you need to use it."

"How can that be? No sir! I can't!"

Morse held it for him silently. After a time, Reeber took it reluctantly. He opened his cloak, then the Armor of Righteousness, and wrapped the belt and holster around his large girth. "Cursed thing," he sputtered, closing the glowing armor and the cloak about him again. "Why the Gates should I need it?"

"It's called an *Acrucian blaster*. It's the same technology as the Vanguard's powerful weapons. It's nigh invincible."

"But I'm here on the Nebo. Why . . ." and then the words of Celeste came back to him, about how he would take the Armor of Righteousness to the Holy Man and the Infidel. But he assumed that would be when they arrived at Mhyrn. Suddenly, he began to suspect that none of this was going to be as simple, straightforward and easy as he thought it would.

"It's time to gather the fleet," Morse said. "Don't you feel it, Clement?"

"Now? Really? Now?"

"Soon. Perhaps sooner than you think. You said the Vanguards were needed to stop Procyx—all twelve."

"All thirteen. Remember the Mhyrnian Vanguard."

"Exactly. It's time to gather the twelve. After I'm gone, touch this crystal here," he pointed to a sparkling green control on the corner of the cube. "It will show you what you need to see."

Reeber shook his head. "How does it know . . ."

Morse shook hands with him. "Good luck," he said and stepped through the cube onto the bridge of the Cygnus. Crew immediately closed upon him, a tall, muscular commander among the first to reach him.

Reeber shook his head, bewildered.

"Aren't you going to do it?" Oreb said after a moment.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do—I mean what I'm supposed to do after—I mean . . ."

"Just touch it, Clement," Melana said. "This is what we've all been waiting for—isn't it?"

"I don't know. Do I go right through into whatever I see? How does this thing know what I'm trying to see?"

Melana came up to him, warmly taking his arm. Reeber felt a cold trail of perspiration trickle down his side. He was having trouble breathing.

"Clement. It's all right. You'll know what to do."

"But I can't fire this weapon!"

"Just touch the crystal," Melana repeated quietly—encouragingly.

"The impossible never seems too hard when someone else has to do it," he said shakily. After a moment, Melana took her hand away. Silently, she and Celeste gathered Kishkor and Oreb, and a moment later, Reeber found himself alone.

He stood still for a time, watching the bridge of the Cygnus. He could see that countless gas giant planets and their moons surrounded the Vanguard. He could hear the discussions among the crew. One by one, the gas giants vanished in what seemed to be hyperspacial jumps. Planets? Whole planets jumping into hyperspace. And then he heard the communiqués. The

gas giants were fortresses—massive starships sent out from Polyphemus to evacuate worlds that were falling to ruin so fast that the entire Federation Navy was unable to cope. There was something horrifying about these fortresses leaving their posts at guarding Polyphemus—something urgent beyond any of the perils of the past. Polyphemus was the center—the seat of power, and it sentinels were fleeing to save the populations of more and more worlds from the awful death of Hypermotility. Reeber stared, unbelieving. More of the huge worlds vanished and then the Cygnus itself turned and plunged into white drive.

"That many worlds . . ." Reeber said uneasily. "Thousands, now—all going into Hypermotility. More and more . . ." He turned from the cube, looking outward through the seemingly boundless chamber of lights. "The end," he said, a sudden chill making him tremble. He shook his head. "But *I can't*! I'm just a man—fat, weak—sheltered in academics all my life. I'm no soldier. Why? Surely there are others who could do this part of it so much better than I!"

His mind drifted briefly back to the memory of the two bodyguards who had accompanied him on the shuttle that had rendezvoused with the Cygnus. *They* were the types for this kind of work. Maybe he could go through the cube and ask Morse. But what if the cube only opened one way? What if he went through and couldn't get back—and he was *supposed* to get back? How would he get the artifacts and Armor of Righteousness to the Holy Man and the Infidel?

"Blast," he sighed after a moment. Twice, he almost touched the control crystal. Each time, he pulled away.

"Thousands of worlds gone—or going. Thousands— and there will be thousands more, and more."

His mind flashed to the words the Cygnus had spoken in him when he had briefly felt that Procyx was so far and distant that it couldn't really be a danger.

"AND YET ALL WILL PERISH IF PROCYX IS NOT STOPPED."

Reeber took a deep breath, his eyes moist from the enormity of all this. At last he touched the control. The cube flashed a brilliant white and then darkened.

At first, as Reeber gazed into it, he thought he was seeing nothing—only blackness. But as time passed, his eyes adjusted. The room he saw within the cube was stone with a dirt floor. A single window could be seen nearly edge on, on the left wall. A faint rose-colored glow shone from it on the opposite wall. Two cots clung to this opposite side of the room. Reeber shook his head, bewildered. This? This was where the Holy Man and the Infidel were? There was no one there—unless . . . "Later? Soon?" he wondered.

Time passed. Nothing changed. After a while, Reeber began to pace, watching the cube. Nothing changed. Nothing.

I I I

Palmer sat quietly watching beneath the underbrush. He wished he still had all the gear they had brought with them from the ferryship to RoseStar—all the camouflage cloaks and multiple bandwidth recon gear, and what he wouldn't give for a depolarizer.

He looked upward again. The sight was chilling. The sky was ablaze with alien stars. All about the heavens shone the old stars of the Milky Way, but these were far dimmer than

the strange new stars of Procyx. Each new star shone with its own, unique coherent hue—like Procyx, but each a different color. Night was hardly dark anymore, so radiant were these scintillating enigmas. Even so, none were as bright as the End Star of Grief. It hung just above the horizon. Was it larger, now—somehow? Palmer tried to remember. It seemed larger.

The sound came again. Something was moving below him—rustling the bushes now and then. After a few minutes of subsequent silence, Palmer looked back at Gaultor asleep during the first watch. The tall Mhyrnian slept fitfully—perhaps not at all. He was trying, so Palmer had kept quiet instead of talking with him—trying to understand more of the ways of Zorl and what everything had meant back at Serenity . . . but most importantly, who Methuselah was. When they had returned to Mhyrn, the Place of Hope had yet blazed with the seemingly unquenchable column of fire he and Gaultor had built earlier. This pleased Gaultor, who said only that it would remain until the work of the Judge was finished.

Again a rustling from the underbrush below claimed Palmer's attention. This time Gaultor woke and, moving silently, came up beside him. Together, wordlessly, they strained and peered then saw a man, pushing noisily through the darkness. He wore a pack, and right behind him followed a woman carrying a two-year old girl asleep over her shoulder.

"What is it?" Palmer whispered carefully. "Who are they? Where are they going at a time like this?"

Gaultor watched for a moment. More families could be seen moving fleetingly through the underbrush and all, apparently, in the same direction. Gaultor stood up straight, looking back in the direction the refugees seemed to be coming from. "From the Outer City," he whispered when he crouched down beside Palmer again.

They watched more and more pass by them. For an hour, perhaps two, the flow of people was steady. Palmer shook his head. "What's going on? Why are they leaving the city?"

Gaultor gave him a brotherly pat on the shoulder. "It's because of us," he said, then when Palmer turned to look at him, he smiled. "It's my watch. Sleep well. Tomorrow we enter the city.

I V

Sentegor shivered against the cold. The perpetual clouds of Markeeome never allowed any direct sunlight to melt the snow, and the dampness of the air made it several times colder than it should have been even on a clear, brisk, winter's night. For a time, as he trudged farther up the slope of the Sleeping One's tomb, the boy prophet seriously worried over what he was doing. Yes, he knew the prophecies. He repeated them over and over to himself to maintain his resolve and to stir him to keep moving forward. When his mind wasn't wrestling between common sense and those visions that had brought him here now, he found himself worrying about his friends below

He brooded over a wrenching loss of opportunity to teach more of the things to come. He grieved over lost opportunities to save lives with what he knew. He suffered a twinge of guilt at having left just when Petravor and the others had finally succeeded in setting up a meeting with some of the most influential among the Judges, merchants and physicians. Here, at last, *might* have been a chance to gain some advocacy with the High Council, a voice of warning that could not be stilled because of the support of rich and influential advocates.

The night of his first report before the Council stung him again. Why did they hate him so? He just spoke the truth. That proved the greatest mystery of all to him. Why? He announced

the coming of the True Ones and a warning of the False! It was a priceless warning both of the nearness of Wrath upon Mhyrn as well as the advent of the days of ultimate salvation from Procyx! "Beware and rejoice," he muttered.

And then he had a sudden, chilling suspicion—the meeting with the influential might really have been a trap of some kind. He knew that he was hated among the High Council—fanatically hated by many for what he professed. A trap? Yes, possibly.

Or what might Mhyrn's influential have demanded in return? Influence always exacted a price. What would he have to compromise to gain support? Probably more than principle would allow, and he would not budge on principle. If either scenario were so, the Creator, in His great mercy, had saved his life and would preserve the lives of those who would listen to the whisperings of inspiration, or humble themselves sufficiently to *hear* such whisperings. Many good people, old followers or those who just now recognized the truth, would be saved from harm if they would hearken to the warning.

At that thought he felt a flood of confirmation. His whole being swelled in amazement at the wisdom and tenderness of the Creator. He knelt beneath an overpowering gratitude toward Him whose name was too holy to be spoken. He now would protect any and all humble enough to pay attention to a call to come out of the cities without knowing why. Yes. Thus, those who ruled their lives by faith or were humble enough to listen would be spared many horrors of the Wrath.

Worriedly, Sentegor's thoughts turned to the dark ships he had seen dropping from the skies and hiding themselves in the depths of the night. Was it just last night? Those ships had radiated evil beyond anything Sentegor had ever felt. The battle *was* readying! He, Sentegor, must be at *his* post when the Creator called him to play his part.

It had taken Sentegor a full day and night to come all the way from the encampment, up the road of the gods and beyond to the crags of snow and glacier. He had not allowed himself any rest. He must not be asleep when the Wrath fell upon the world. He was tired and had eaten nothing for a full day—his time was too important not to fast—and now, deep in the night, he was still short of the Place of Hope. If he could just reach it, *then* he might rest, to be ready to serve. But no rest until then—not until.

The Place of Hope! Might he yet encounter the True Ones there? If there were any place on this world where the True Ones might come to prepare for the days of salvation from Procyx, it would be the Place of Hope. If they *were* at the Place of Hope, he could still warn them of the False Ones.

Perhaps he might even obtain from the Most High Nobleman some idea of what it was he was actually supposed to do—standing above all to finally preserve the House of Mhyrn when the Wrath fell. What could it mean? He knew himself to be the Judge spoken of in the prophecies, but he did not know his duty in connection with that protecting care.

Markeeome's clinging clouds thickened toward dark gray—a mist through which Sentegor trudged, nearly blind. Only directly overhead could any suggestion of sky be seen. He saw the bizarre, new stars of searing color—the stars of grief, the children of Procyx.

Suddenly, the snow beneath Sentegor grew irregular and bumpy. He glanced down and discovered footprints—two sets, moving opposite from the way he was climbing. His pulse quickened. Footprints! Two sets! Coming downward . . . from the Place of Hope? Yes! He began forward with new urgency. He was filled with fresh determination when realization dawned on what the direction of these footprints implied. Sentegor's heart fell. They had already left. They must have come and left.

What would he do now? How could he learn his role without the guidance of the Holy

Man? Sentegor chided himself at his hesitation in coming. Maybe if he had left the moment after waking from the dream he might have met them. He may have missed them by mere minutes!

Sentegor could see it all in his mind. Perhaps the Most High Nobleman had known he would come. Maybe he had even waited for him to come—waited until he could stay no longer and then, sadly, left—preparing, as best he could, the way for Sentegor to follow, knowing perfectly the part the Judge of the prophecies was to play in the days of Wrath.

Perhaps.

Sentegor looked only at the footprints as he hurried forward. He followed the trail higher and higher up the soft glacier. Abruptly, something made him stop. He sensed a wall nearby. Looking carefully, he found the dimly lit face of a sheer cliff. It stood a mere arm's length away. But more importantly, just off to his left a bit, Sentegor saw the warm glow of a faint, amber light. Its shape marked the opening of a cave in the solid rock. He turned aside and went in.

The cave twisted like a serpent into the mountain Markeeome. With each step, Sentegor felt the iciness of the mountain fogs sloughing off. The amber light grew in intensity while its color swelled into gold. The boy prophet pushed on eagerly. At last he rounded a final twist in the cave. The source of the glowing warmth burst upon him, inexorably drawing his gaze to its magnificence—a brilliant column of spinning fire. Its flames cast their gold upon the great murals of the chamber.

"The Place of Hope!"

It had been hewn from the solid stone of the mountain. The sound of rushing waters hissed from somewhere beyond the fire.

Flames gusted brilliantly. They seemed to expand, filling Sentegor's vision. He stared, unblinking. His eyes stung from the light. In that enthralling maelstrom the boy prophet saw the whole of the world of Mhyrn in vision.

It quaked and rumbled fearfully. Great towers toppled and buildings collapsed like empty shells amid furious clouds of muddy rain. Sentegor beheld scores of people crushed beneath cascading ruins. Others he saw carried away in bizarre clusters of nightmarish whirlwinds. He saw the seas heaving as if they boiled. Immense tsunamis engulfed whole cities. The sun lurched and fell. The heavens filled with lightning and dazzling, massive auroras.

The Outer City of Zorl rocked and shuddered dangerously toward collapse while the Holy Man and the Infidel fought to reach the great, cone temple, intact among murky ruins.

And horrible, dark demons pursued to destroy them.

Sentegor beheld Markeeome, the tomb of the Great Sleeping One. It was enveloped in wildly swirling clouds that glowed first silver and then exploded in blazing, golden vortices. The storm of light spread across the heavens. These were the same fires that curled and spun before him now, raised to their ultimate power. He saw the dazzling flames lift him, the boy prophet, skyward as on a crest of molten gold. He glowed of himself in its midst and stood, finally, above the very clouds of the world. The golden magnificence spread outward from him toward every horizon. It quelled the terrors of planetary death. Beneath its brilliant canopy, the life of Mhyrn waited, preserved. This *was* as the prophecies had said. Sentegor knew what he was to do.

V

The great metropolis, called the Outer City of Zorl, loomed before Palmer and Gaultor.

Overshadowing every other structure was the mammoth temple to Zorl. It was the conical edifice of pluridium Palmer and the crew of the ferryship had seen in the distance upon their unwilling approach to Mhyrn. The temple reached well into the clouds, and now that Palmer could see it more closely, he found that the polished lavender metal was etched with countless hieroglyphs and pictographs. Patrols of golden, KRAS ships cruised overhead, ever watchful. As before, high above the fighters and dim in the distance were the stacked rings of Mhyrnian battle fleets. They hung like clouds, standing ready to protect the temple.

Gaultor had led them away from the road of the gods, and now they traversed one of the centralized modern highways that had been constructed since the Federation had been expelled from the planet. Here, affluent merchants traveled in opulent ground cars. They callously ignored the rows of malnourished transient families that had set up begging. These latter lined intersections far down the road from where Palmer and Gaultor had emerged from the rainforest. The Holy Man paused to watch, shaking his head. After a time, he continued on toward the city.

"This is not as it should be." The Mhyrnian said. "*All* are children of the Creator. None should ever lack. These are days of plenty, but also grief in many ways, Martin. It is a shame of my people. It shows that much evil infests here."

Gaultor walked on in silence for a time, then turning to Palmer, lowered his head, shaking it in disbelief. "My good friend—I once chided your people for their evils. It is obvious to me that mine are little better. Can you forgive them?"

"You remember what we said back then—the two of us? There are good and evil among all people. It has been my experience that the good often live quietly. Such humble ones not only want what is best but work to make it so, though their work is seldom seen. Perhaps we don't see the good ones at this moment, but surely they quietly help."

Gaultor did not answer, but walked on in silence. At last, he said, "Yes, it is so. But it must be that many of them have left the city by now—many or all."

"Those families we saw leaving the city at night?"

"Most likely. If there are any that remain . . ."

"Wait," Palmer interrupted quietly. Gaultor followed his gaze to find two security policemen who were watching them with unabashed interest. "Looks like we're getting a lot of notice." They watched for a moment and then, with obvious, calculated purpose, Gaultor straightened. He glanced confidently at Palmer in a silent invitation to follow, then turning aside, walked toward them.

"Say nothing. Do nothing, no matter what happens," the Mhyrnian whispered to him. Palmer had been about to enter the Kyrellian battle disciplines but let them go. His stomach began to crawl with uneasiness.

"I offer greetings to the protector of the Holy Place," Gaultor said in Interworld. One of the policemen answered him in Mhyrnese. Gaultor held up his hand to stop, speaking in Interworld again. "I speak in the infidel tongue, for standing beside me is an infidel—even the Infidel of prophecy. You see, the time for all things to be made peaceable has come. Look, my brothers. Look at me. Do you not know these robes I wear?"

"They are excellent imitations," the policeman said. "I will give you that."

"I say with all soberness that this infidel and I are the prophesied ones who should come," Gaultor said quietly. "I say again that the peaceable time is near at hand. Will you kindly escort us to the temple, that we may accomplish our charge?"

Palmer could guess that others were closing in around them. He opened his Seership. He

could see in all directions, as he had been able to do on the Vanguard Gabriel. Palmer discerned twenty guards moving into strategic positions. If he and Gaultor moved now he might yet be able to break a path. He began to reach up to touch Gaultor's arm.

"The Infidel will remain silent," Gaultor said, looking at him sternly. Palmer nearly spoke, but withheld. This was, after all, Gaultor's world. He knew what he was doing. Reluctantly, Palmer closed his Seership to the situation; closed his eyes, even—withdrawing into himself. He listened only to Gaultor's words.

"I ask you again, protector of that which is holy—will you escort us to the temple of Zorl that we may fulfill our duty and remove, finally, the End Star of Grief from the heavens? I say unto you plainly that this must be done soon if we are to escape the Wrath."

"How is it that a demon's vile mouth can speak of such holy things without perishing in flames?" The policeman's voice grated in revulsion. Palmer opened his eyes to see the security man's face darken to a glower. "You truly *are* the prophesied ones—the False Ones. We knew of your coming. You are under arrest. Come peacefully, lest you incur the just anger of the True Ones who have all power to destroy you."

Gaultor hesitated for a moment, then raising his hands, held them to be manacled. Guards closed in now, roughly binding them and quickly taking them into the city.

V I

"What?" Reepichor looked up from his wine, not tasting it. His voice was angry. Ever since the Holy Man and the Infidel had arrived he was suffering from a growing disquiet. He could not identify this uneasiness, yet it seemed tied to the two prophesied ones. Something didn't *smell* right. He took another deep swallow of wine then put the goblet down on his desk. The Major of his policemen waited until Reepichor looked up at him again. "Well? Speak!"

"The followers of the boy prophet continue to leave the city by night."

"So?"

"They are doing so from all the cities—Dofog, Peshoj, Sia, Thism, Ethorpp, —everywhere. They easily number in the tens of thousands."

"Yes. Is that a concern?"

"Might they not raise up in revolt?"

"The last intelligence report I received said that they are mere families or old women or orphans. They take no weapons with them, only food and provisions. How could they be a threat to us?" And then, Reepichor thought for a moment. "You *are* seizing their properties, as the Holy One has commanded, are you not?"

"Yes sir."

"So what is the problem? Should they choose to return, they will have nothing—the wages of following a foolish, visionary boy. All they left belongs to us. We all share in these newly obtained properties do we not? Your men are hundreds of times richer now than before the coming of this usurping boy prophet," He said the last words with a sneer. "No. I say good riddance. We are finally free of this prattling pubescent and his incessant whinings of doom. It's been such an unnecessarily nagging political scourge. I say let them all go and rot in the jungles. Fools." He poured himself another glass and downed it immediately. The Major waited. "Well? Is there something else?"

"There is. The False Ones have arrived."

Reepichor was on his feet. He swung ever so slightly from the wine, but not enough for an untrained eye to notice. "You're sure?"

"They claim to be the True Ones."

"We have had many of those."

"But this pair is different. The one claiming to be the Holy Man wears robes that look authentic, and the Infidel . . ." here the Major grinned. " . . . The Infidel is a Federationist!"

"I'll be cursed! A Federationist?" Reepichor turned and gave himself another shot of wine. "Is he one of those that landed in the Federationist ferryship a while ago? The one we let the combines have?"

"We have not questioned him on that matter. Should we?"

Reepichor shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The True Ones rule. I have seen them for myself. They truly come in power." Reepichor took another swallow of wine. "Did these new ones show you any signs?"

"Signs?"

"Miracles. Anything?"

"No, sir. Nothing"

"Good. Then things are as they should be, no? Have these False Ones been searched, as the Holy One instructed?"

"They have."

"Well?"

"Neither wore any stolen robes from the most High Noblemen to the Great God beneath their cloaks, as the True Ones feared. The Nobleman's robe seems authentic but filthy. He may have found it or stolen it from some museum. He also wears an amulet on a chain about his neck. It is made of pluridium encrusted with a few stones. It appears to be from the first days of the world, at least the hieroglyphs . . ."

"You can buy those in the marketplace if you're shrewd enough to Fed the price down. I have a few at home myself. A mere trifle, this amulet. But they do not carry anything resembling the sacred artifacts—the plate or the sphere? They do not have anything like them?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then. They cannot be the True Ones, can they?"

"No, sir. I suppose not, sir. Do you wish anything done with the amulet?"

"As I said, it is a trifling piece of jewelry. Give it to your men."

"Fine. Well, actually none of my men *wanted* it—not with the properties they now share thanks to the fleeing followers of Sentegor. Still if you wish, we can take the amulet away from him."

Reepichor felt a sudden hesitation—a sudden halting fear. He reached down to his desk, filled his goblet again and took a drink. "N . . . n . . . no," he stuttered. "I . . . I see no reason to deprive him of something like that. Just part of his costume." Reepichor took another swallow. He went to the window, again fighting a trace of dizziness. The sky toward the south was darkening with clouds. A blistering barrage of lightning flashed near Markeeome's range. Seconds later the crumpling roar of faraway thunder rolled across the Outer City of Zorl.

The Hall of the Governance stood proudly below in the center of the City square. It stood directly opposite the temple. For all its opulence, it cowered beneath the shadow of the mountain-sized temple edifice of polished pluridium. The Hall was surrounded by the outer court crowded with anxious merchants, governors and chiefs, all awaiting audience with the Holy

Man. Since he had come, the Holy Man had stirred the High Council with promises of grandeur. He spoke of days to come when the race chosen of the Creator would rise as an empire to rule the galaxy at last. It was an immediately popular notion. There was still a lot of anger toward the Federation, and Mhyrn's immense supply of natural pluridium seemed to make such a dream plausible. Didn't it? Reepichor took a final swallow of wine, emptying his goblet again. "Where are the False Ones now?"

"We have them in a holding cell. Should we execute them? It would be a popular gesture of support for the High Council, and surely the Holy Man would approve."

"I am not as confident in that as you are." Reepichor turned to face him. "I have found that it is best to be careful in dealing with all political forces, no matter how surely they seem to be defined. We are career politicians. Popularity can swing at the slightest nudge. Take them to a permanent cell for now. Make sure they are cared for comfortably, but not like kings in exile. Best to be able to go either way with the situation. Don't you agree?

The Major bowed without expression and left. Reepichor went back to his desk. The wine flask was empty. Why did he feel so uneasy about all this? It was all straightforward, wasn't it? Then the nagging hint of doubt stirred sickly within him anew. Reepichor shut his eyes, trying to force it away from him. What if the boy prophet *was* a true servant of the Creator? What if the ones in prison *were* the True Ones and they who ruled in the Hall of Governance below the False Ones? What if they were? He looked around the room for another flask of wine.

V I I

The iron door closed, raking noisily over tracks half buried in dirt. The clanging rattle of locks echoed down the hallways of the prison, falling finally into silence. Palmer began immediately surveying their cell. There were two cots along one wall and a single window facing the east. The light of day was shining its pale, rose-colored light onto the perpendicular wall. Opposite that, an adjoining room led off to a small lavatory and shower. Things could be worse. When he turned around he saw that Gaultor was seated on one of the cots, staring at the dirt floor.

"So what do we do now?" Palmer asked, sitting on the other cot. The tall Mhyrnian looked up and smiled.

"Perhaps the hardest part of our mission. We wait."

"What are we waiting for?"

"The Creator will move when it is time. Beyond that, I know nothing."

They both fell silent for a while. Palmer stood and went to the window. The prison lay outside the city on the west side. Night was falling. Procyx could be seen in the eastern sky, perhaps thirty degrees above the horizon. Palmer watched the growing darkness. The city lights came alive in twinkling beauty. When he turned back, the ceiling was glowing bright enough to see around. Even so, it was dim—depressing. Perhaps, he concluded, by design. Anyone put here would be intended to have his spirit broken. Palmer fought it. "Why were we searched when we were brought here? I mean, I don't understand why were taken captive in the first place."

"Others claiming the rights and responsibilities have already come. It seems that *they* have been accepted. Do not dismay. All this has been seen of the Creator and prophesied. Those who live and see by faith will not be misled. As for the search, I must assume the police were

looking for the sacred artifacts—the plate and the sphere."

"But we don't have them. All we have is your amulet . . ."

Gaultor raised his hand to shush him. Immediately, Palmer understood. The cell might be monitored. Gaultor responded. "The amulet is a mere token of my ancestry. I hold it dear for its memory. Nothing more."

Palmer nodded. Apparently, the amulet—the Great Key Methuselah had given Gaultor—was to serve some function in concert with holy instruments Palmer had seen Ambylor give away into safekeeping. And then Palmer puzzled. If they were so essential to the destruction of Procyx, why didn't he and Gaultor have them now? How could they ever obtain them here in prison?

There were other questions he wanted to ask Gaultor now that they had nothing to do but wait. But he guessed that he might not have such an opportunity now—not with suspicious ears recording everything they said. He turned to look out the window again and felt Gaultor come up behind him. The Mhyrnian stared out the window with him.

The End Star shone in its magnificent, evening splendor. Palmer found himself gazing in fresh wonder. It shone searingly clear, and yet there were strange distortions surrounding it that Palmer had never seen before. He squinted at the convolutions. Were they clouds—mere atmospheric constructions? Or, perhaps they were strange interstellar nebulae that now surrounded the glowering End Star in a nearly perfect ring of milky gray. Palmer saw more. Forking across the dull whiteness were filamentary threadings of inky red darkness. They seemed like intruding capillaries. And near Procyx itself, there was a shimmering ring of multicolored radians. It looked like . . .

"An iris!" Palmer whispered. "It's an eye!" He made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "The Eye of the Procyx."

"Yes," Gaultor replied. "*The Eye* itself portrayed. The end of hopeful solutions. It is very near, now. I do not think we have long to wait." After a moment, he put his hand on Palmer's shoulder. "We probably won't be fed tonight. I suggest we try to get some sleep."

* * *

"Martin," Gaultor's voice was quiet but urgent. "Wake up. Now."

Palmer was immediately alert. He sat up quickly. Gaultor's face was edge-lit by some golden light beyond where he could see. When Palmer turned toward the light he saw a heavy, bearded man standing before a shimmering opening in the wall. At least, that was what it seemed to be. Palmer stood. The heavy man came forward eagerly, extending his hand.

"I'm Clement Reeber. I can't believe all this is finally happening." He turned to Gaultor. "You are the Holy Man. I am deeply honored to know both of you. I have something you need

"Where . . ." Palmer began. "How did you get here? What about the surveillance . . .

"We are safe from that for the moment," Gaultor replied.

"Yes, yes," the corpulent man added. "I am sure that is so. Now, about me. I come from a spacecraft now approaching Mhyrn—or perhaps Procyx. The ship is one of the first ancient vessels of light—perhaps the oldest." Reeber began undoing his outer cloak. "Do not be alarmed. I have been told to give you this robe . . ."

The room suddenly burst with light. Palmer stared at the brilliance, transfixed. He was overwhelmed by a transcendent, soaring of his heart. He recognized this immediately. It was as it had back on the Vanguard Gabriel—a boundless joy that was both timeless and endless. He reeled beneath its power. He could not pull his eyes away from the splendorous brilliance of the

robe. He didn't want to anyway.

Only vaguely did Palmer recognize that Reeber was carefully removing the garment.

From the corner of his attention, Palmer could see Gaultor. The Holy Man was equally mesmerized by the light of the robe. But his hands shone like suns! Gaultor himself burned. The skin of his body seemed only a shell of paper for a searing fire within.

Reeber draped the shining robe over his arm, and the glorious rainbow of scintillations fell away. Only a robe of silvery workmanship remained

"The Armor or Righteousness," Gaultor whispered, wonderingly. Palmer saw that his cheeks were stained with tears. He, himself, wiped his face dry. "Yes. It was given into my care by a great Nobleman to the Most High named Metrasor. He is, I fear, dead now. But before passing, he gave me the powers of his office, along with this robe. I know nothing more at this time, except that you are to have it."

"What about the artifacts," Palmer stood now. Suddenly, he remembered that the cell was possibly monitored. He looked at Gaultor as if to say he was sorry, but the Mhyrnian only smiled.

"As I said, we are safe, for the moment. Speak your mind."

Palmer nodded. "Do you have the artifacts the Holy Man and the Infidel are supposed to have?"

"The orb and the plate?" Reeber answered.

"Yes. Do you know of them?"

"I have them back aboard the ship. I will get them."

But Gaultor reached out with his large hands to stop Reeber. "I don't feel that now is the time. Keep them. You can watch us through the portal there, can you not?"

"Well, yes—I . . . I suppose," Reeber was unsure.

"Hold them safe for the time. I do not know exactly what lies ahead for us. Keep them in your care until we are safely within the temple to Zorl—that great, conical building without. It is there. Go look."

Reeber went over to the window and looked out. He nodded, turning back to Palmer and Gaultor.

"Once we are inside," Gaultor went on, "we shall be safe and can administer the plate."

"What about the orb?"

"Once it has brought you to Procyx, it will have fulfilled its purpose. We will need only the plate to raise the Great Zorl into the skies for the act of salvation that will rid us all of this blight."

Reeber nodded, then opened his cloak again. He unhooked a belt and holster that held a hand blaster. It was a strange-looking weapon.

"The commander of one of the Vanguards gave this to me. I know nothing of weapons. I think it will serve you better. I will not need it, you see. I will remain on the starship until you are inside the temple where, as you say, all will be safe and I can come and hand over the plate. Besides, as this holy man . . ."

"I am Gaultor."

"Thank you. As Gaultor said, we don't know what is ahead. You will surely need this more than I."

Palmer took the weapon. It was incredibly light for pluridium. As he tested the grip, removing the blaster from its holster, the grip shifted within his hand, conforming itself perfectly to his grasp.

"I assume it is a weapon of great power. Conceal it well."

There was a shuddering rumble from within the shimmering in the wall behind Reeber. He turned, looking back at it unsure. “I must return. Something is going on . . .” The large man turned nervously and plunged back through the wall.

* * *

There was no sensation as Reeber passed again through the cube of light. The moment he had returned to the Nebo he felt an uneasy heaviness. He pushed through the wall onto the bridge where the others were waiting, looking outward through the control bubble.

Before the Nebo shone Procyx. It was massive in its searing glory. Terrible wandering tentacles of coherent blue writhed about it, reaching light-years outward. All about it, stars of similar design but varying in color blazed their own, alien brilliances. But there was more than the horrors of the End Star. The black holes that were the Eye of Polyphemus had arrived with the Nebo. They churned about in their own patterns, their accretion nebulae colorful in reds and oranges against the spectacle of Procyx and its children. Reeber gazed in marred fascination. The lingering heaviness of heart he had felt upon returning from the Mhyrnian prison cell blunted any sense of wonder Reeber might have felt. Nothing he did or thought could displace it.

Why should he feel this way? He had done as he was supposed to do. He had given the Eye that reveals the Self—the Armor of Righteousness—to the Holy Man and the Infidel as he was supposed to. Why the darkness inside him? He had even given the blaster away . . .

The blaster! That was it. Reeber had hated the weapon from the moment he had touched it—not hated *it* exactly, but hated what it potentially empowered him to do. Morse had given it to *him*, not to be passed on to anyone else. *Was* there some specific reason? The moment he considered that, he knew it was right. The blaster was not for them, it was for *him*—to perform some task only *he* could do. But he did not *want* to do anything involving it. He was sure that whatever it was, he *couldn't* do it. No, these feelings of uneasiness must be wrong. Maybe the depression he felt was a result of giving up the Armor of Righteousness. He had felt so safe with it on, and now it was gone. That was it, wasn't it? It must be.

Still, Reeber was unconvinced. But what could he do? *They* had it now. Surely, it would serve them. Why couldn't it have been the right thing? No, best let them have it.

The Coss sphere shone with intricate, sparkling patterns—webbings of golden radiance that shifted and coursed all over its surface. They were like frenzied star-sparks, swarming about the glowing, blue jewel embedded at the apex of the sphere. Ripples of power and gravity buffeted the Nebo, presumably coming either from Procyx and its hoard or from the massive gravitational complexities of the Eye of the Polyphemus. Reeber was momentarily taken by a notion. Here the Eye of Polyphemus, made blind beheld the *sighted* Eye of the Procyx, soon to be blinded. Here, salvation would be wrought.

The Nebo hovered incredibly close to Procyx. On board, Reeber, Melana, Celeste and the sons of Metrasor viewed the End Star as few ever had. The black hole arrays surrounded the End Star completely, a turbulent, encasing bubble of power.

The Coss sphere held them both stable, here—the Nebo and the Eye of Polyphemus waiting now, waiting . . .

VIII

Korday sat in the posh quarters that had been prepared for the Holy Man and the Infidel when the Outer City of Zorl had first been restored. Servants stood just outside the palatial complex equipped with expensive and highly illegal—illegal from the Federation's point of view—biotranzes. These were tuned to the Holy Man's beck and call. He need only think of them, and they would come. Goren, wearing his dark robes as usual, sat across an aquarium centered conversation pit, silently regarding him.

"What do you think, my swollen minion," Korday said. "We have it all, now. The people are fired to build an empire. They always are if they think it can be done. Of course, it will not be the empire they expect, but by the time this becomes evident to them, it will be impossible for them to do anything beyond my slightest bidding or the tiniest whim of Echion the Great himself, when he is at last freed!"

"And I have truly exercised great wisdom, for I have called forth the razor ships I have prepared from the far heavens. They hide at Markeeome, waiting. I will take no chance that the True Ones might waken the Sleeping One to help them. They huddle about Markeeome so closely that the Primoids' Place of Hope is boxed in now. None can escape it if they are there. The ships will only leave to avenge us should we die . . . but we SHALL NOT! The wisdom of the Primoids is as foolishness to me! We *shall* build the Fourth Empire and none can stop us!"

Korday stood, carefully testing his hair to make sure nothing was amiss. He walked across the spun-pluridium carpeted floor to the expansive, wall-sized window that faced out over the courtyard intervening between the temple and the Hall of Governance. Muffled cheers rose from without. Korday, smiling broadly, raised his hand in a generous wave. He turned back, laughing. "They love me. They watch my every move—quantify my every expression; make law of my every wish—*MY EVERY WISH!* Do you hear?

Goren sat motionless, not breathing. Stormers had no need for breathing. After a time, he spoke.

"What about Procyx? The people are anxious."

"When I need some fifth rate minion to tell me anything it will be in the days of my aged idiocy! Do not trouble me with such things—do not! I have spoken already with the High Council. *They* are content to wait upon my pleasure, and should they need reminding of the new order—well, that is what you are for." He turned a threatening, icy gaze on Goren. "And do not think I have learned nothing of human nature in billions of years. I know you plot against me. An opportunist, you are. Of all that are self-servers, the opportunists are the vilest. I know your heart, my bloated sack of putrefying half-flesh." He smiled. "The Helotoid has been instructed by me to watch you. Even at this time, he watches you, and he can see your intent by the very way you blink your eyes. Ah, yes. Prudence. Prudence. You would do well to subscribe to it."

There was a soft, pleasant chiming sound from the walls. Korday lowered the privacy shield he had had in place while he and Goren had talked. With magnificent compassion, he asked the walls what was wanted.

"A report, Holy One," a voice spoke. "From the boundaries of Procyx."

"A report?"

"Reconnaissance—er, scientific, in nature."

Korday frowned, but his voice was warm and friendly.

"Is the loyal reconnaissance Servant to the Plan here for a conference, even now?"

"He is, Holy One."

"Then by all means, send him in to us."

Korday looked over at Goren and a moment later the faint, theatrical aura of fire Goren could make appeared about Korday. Goren, himself, sat absolutely still.

The officer came immediately forward and knelt.

"It is the highest of honors to be in your presence, Holiest of Men. I salute you."

"Rise, good and faithful brother. Tell me of your report."

The man stood. Korday relished the expression of awe as the officer caught sight of the subtle burnings that surrounded him. It fumbled the officer's words for only a moment. "There is great turbulence about the Procyx."

"Turbulence?" Korday's left cheek twitched. "Turbulence? Can you be more specific?"

"Black holes—thousands of them with their accretion nebulae have suddenly appeared all about the Procyx."

Korday frowned, turning his back on the officer for a moment. "You are sure of this?" he said, still turned away.

"I saw them myself."

"Is there more?"

"More?"

"I mean, were there any ships," Korday turned to face him again. "Ships, man! Were there vessels of any kind or size there as well?"

The officer flushed at Korday's tone. "I could discern nothing—the turbulence of the black holes made all possible scanning impossible. Even visual reconnaissance within the shell of the new black holes was impossible."

Korday nodded. "Yes. It is as I have feared. What you saw, my good brother, was a new, darkening blight put about the Procyx. It will serve to amplify its destructive power. It has been placed there in a final attempt to dissuade us from establishing the empire of Zorl."

"Yes, I see, Holy One. But who could do such a thing?"

"Why there can be only one possibility. The False Ones. They were captured this morning at the gates of the city, trying to pass themselves off as us who stand before you. They have been imprisoned, of course, but apparently, even from their cells they were able to conjure up this plague to frighten us."

Now Korday walked over and put his arm around the soldier. "Do not fear. The might of Zorl shall prevail. Go, now. Tell Reepichor to have the False Ones brought before us in full council, that we may judge them fairly. This calamity will not dissuade us from our great destiny. Go now, my good friend. I empower you to execute this holy errand. Call the Council into judicial session as well. Hurry."

The soldier hesitated.

Korday waited, then spoke softly. "What is it, little one?"

"I do not wish to seem to counsel thee, Holy One . . ."

"Speak freely. Your loyalty is known full well to us."

"I wonder only at reconciling the law, Lord. Is it well to call a full trial now, Holy One? It is the middle of the night. Surely you, of all, know that by law no judgements are to be made in the darkness of the world."

"Your posterity shall bless you for your desires to obey all things in perfect order, my good brother. Fear no longer concerning the matter. These are new days. Think well upon this new law I tell you. No judgement can hereafter be made in darkness when the Light of all things stands

as judge. I am that Light, my brother. I will shine enough for all to see the truth. Do you believe this?"

The officer bowed. "I go with haste. The False Ones shall not see another dawn before they stand in judgement!" He turned and hurried from the room. The moment he was gone, Goren put on the privacy shield again.

"Curse, them!" he roared. "Damn the Primoids for this!"

"What?" Goren said, puzzled. "Isn't it . . ."

"Shut up, you driveling flatch! You know nothing! The black holes! You idiot! It is the Eye! The Eye of Polyphemus! I must destroy the True Ones! Now! Fetch my judicial robes!"

Chapter Six
The Wrath of Zorl

I

Perhaps thirty Mhyrnian soldiers armed with buzzing depolarizers surrounded Gaultor and Palmer as they stood before the solid-gold, jewel-endowed doors that opened into to the central hall of governance.

"This is an illegal trial," Gaultor said quietly to Palmer. "According to ancient law, no judgements are ever to be passed upon during the night. It is symbolic. Darkness hides truth. Light reveals it. It is one of our most fundamental laws."

Palmer smiled wryly but said nothing. A moment later the imposing doors swung wide, revealing the magnificent hall of governance. There had been a din of discussion until that moment, but all fell silent as the two were led into the exact center of the vaulting chamber. It was like an amphitheater with tiered rows of seats rising higher and wider as the room spread outward. It was nearly filled to capacity, but as Palmer surveyed the hall he could see that some seats *were* empty. His gaze was suddenly drawn to an opulent balcony that stood opposite them. A pluridium throne adorned the stand beneath a rich canopy of ornate tapestries. Seven lesser thrones rested on a dais below. Six of them were occupied by Mhyrnians with ornately styled beards.

"Another farce," Gaultor whispered. "No trial of state is *ever* to be conducted without the presence of all seven of the High Chiefs." Palmer nodded then looked upward. The ceiling was a large dome of clear crystal. One of the moons of Mhyrn shone its golden light into the hall from the zenith. Crowding about it in the sky were the bizarre neostars of Procyx. Palmer felt a sudden chill at all this that only compounded the uneasiness of his stomach.

"Martin," Gaultor spoke softly but urgently. "Open your Seership. Study the one who will sit upon the throne of power on the balcony. Do nothing else. Wait for the Creator to give you further direction. When he does, follow it. You will know."

"Let all give ear!" an amplified voice proclaimed in heavily accented Interworld. "For this is the time of Judgement as set forth by the prophesied Ones. There are, in our midst, False Ones proclaiming power—as has been foretold. Let each give ear. Let all give ear. "

There was a drum roll. Palmer looked up toward the looming balcony and saw a full orchestra readying. The annunciation continued.

"Stand all—for the prophesied Ones approach. Let all show praise in his heart to the Holy Man as well as to the Infidel, whose name is unimportant. All rise and bow down to the Great and most Holy Man of prophecy: Coryhor!"

* * *

The orchestra filled the hall with a fanfare that was both grandiose and impressive. Waiting for the right dramatic moment, Korday, under the Mhyrnian name he had assumed of Coryhor, feigned piety and walked solemnly up the steps that led to the throne's balcony. Behind

him, Goren maintained the aura of close yet unmistakable flames surrounding him. Frenzied cheering erupted. It rose to a fever pitch. Goren expanded the fires until they formed a halo-like ring about the cluster lieutenant of Echion. At this sign the cheering fell off as abruptly as it had come. The silence was vibrant with awe and wonder. Korday inclined his head in a reverential bow and took the throne. The hooded Goren came and stood at his left hand.

"Let this trial begin," Korday spoke with magnificent resonance.

"Great and Most Holy of Prophesied Noblemen," a High Judge approached with a ceremonial roll of indictment. His voice echoed from walls overhung with magnificent tapestries. "These are men who claim the office of Holy Man and Infidel. They challenge you."

A murmuring of anger and disbelief rippled across the assemblage. It halted abruptly at the raising of Korday's hand.

"The law says that any who come so claiming must be allowed audience. I serve Zorl, who is all-just. Let these who make claim speak."

Korday leaned forward, resting his elbows on the arm of the throne, looking down at the two figures below him. Seconds passed, then minutes. At last, Korday spoke.

"Well? Do you speak?"

"This is an illegal trial," the hooded figure—obviously an offworlder—spoke. His Interworld accent clearly identified him as a Federationist.

The High Judge burst forward, his voice sharp with contempt. "And what does a Federationist offworlder know of our laws, vile pretender?"

"Look overhead, all of you," the offworlder said. "Is that not the Moon above us? We are tried at night. It is forbidden, is it not? What's more, the minds of all assembled seem already set on our guilt. We have done no evil, yet we are brought here from a prison cell! If this is not a farce then how is it we stand here with no counsel assigned to be our advocate?"

There was a thick silence. Korday squinted at the true Infidel, a suspicion growing within him. The offworlder continued.

"But that is not all. The High Chiefs. There are only six present. This is a trial of state. The law demands that all seven stand here."

Some motion caught Korday's eye. He looked up at the gallery of the initiate counselors. Some of them were in the act of leaving. He had to stop this. He stood, raising his hand and calling out to assemblage.

"It is true that in the observance of the old ways this *could* be misconstrued as an illegal assemblage. But these are new days—the dawning of the age of greatness. Much of what is old *shall* be done away, and new laws of power placed in their stead. I implore all to wait patiently and see."

The initiates returned to their seats—most of them. Korday seethed inside. He would see those who left dead before dawn. But first things first. He was about to speak when the High Judge, wary now, took the offensive.

"Why do you not show your face—you who pretend to be the Infidel!" He turned to the Council. "How is it that we allow the words of an infidel to be spoken here in this holy assemblage?"

"You misuse the word infidel. Anciently it meant only *offworlder*."

"You dare tell *me* the interpretation of the scriptures?"

"I am an offworlder only. I am not a foreigner to the ways of Zorl."

The Council exploded in a riot. Korday sat in silence, watching. He saw more of the initiates hurriedly leaving. The High Judge shouted for silence. A full minute later the uproar

finally subsided enough for the High Judge to be heard again.

"Look up here, you blind idiot. Look at him who sits upon the throne of glory. He resides there because there is in him unmistakable power. Are all of you blind as well as insolent? Do you not see the Golden Death surrounding and protecting the Most High Nobleman here?"

"I see a man, only—covered in flames that are not real." The offworlder answered in a bellowing voice. "They come from the other that stands there behind him. If you will look beneath his robes, you will find no man there, but a creature of machines."

A new uproar exploded. Korday stood, a sudden stab of panic burning inside him. For long seconds the room spun about him. He fought to regain himself. "A seer!" He muttered to himself. "I'll be cursed. It must be, then. A seer!" He dared say nothing to Goren at this precise moment. The gallery of the initiates seethed with people scrambling to leave. The irony of it struck Korday. It was always the young who were quick to admit hypocrisy. But now, as his eyes moved across the hall, he saw that some among the physicians' gallery were beginning to leave. The flash of humor darkened into rage.

"Stop!" he called, enhancing his voice with guilt and shame spells from the Black Arts. Everyone halted, even the initiates. It took all Korday had to keep from smiling. "All of this is so much rhetoric. Charges and accusations from an offworlder. Ask why the Most High Nobleman does not speak. Why does he let a Federationist—yes, we know you, vile killer of children—why does a criminal of atrocities speak for a Mhyrnian?"

Silence.

"Is it because you are false? Why do you say nothing in your own behalf?"

Silence.

"And you Federationist. Why do *you* not show your face?" Now, if Korday could only see the face of this seer, he might know if his suspicion about him was right. Press the issue. "You hide yourself. What have you to fear, if you are the one you claim to be?"

Korday watched the hooded head turn toward the silent Mhyrnian for a moment, then turning back, he lifted his hands and revealed his face.

A powerful surge of elation swept across Korday. Yes. Yes! It was as he thought! The Federationist was an ancestor to the Warriors of Light! Oh, this was too good to be true! Here, he could destroy not only the True Ones, but he could wipe out any possibility of the Warriors of Light ever appearing to challenge the final, universal empire of Echion! He must turn the tide quickly, while he still could.

Prudence. Prudence.

Now that he had them, they must never have any opportunity of escape, no matter how slight. If they survived this trial, he *knew* that the Creator would spoil things again. He had ways for turning even the worst of horrors to good that even Korday had to admire. No, they must die—and as soon as possible. He began pumping the room with spells of anger and fear.

"There, see? A Federationist! A thug whose atrocities exceed horror beyond anything known of Mhyrn! How would Zorl—He who is Most Holy—ever choose a *Federationist* for so sacred an office?" Korday shoved conviction at the Council with such force that he saw several of the older men lose consciousness from it. He backed down a bit. "Look upon me, my brothers," he now poured out awe. "I hold within me the Golden Death. Can you not see it?" He gestured broadly toward Goren. "It is I and he who are the True Ones. It is not some mute crackpot and a Federationist. *We* will raise the world to its new age of power. I say this humbly—not to boast . . ." he sprinkled conviction tinged with pleasure—a careful brew. " . . .I want only salvation for the Chosen of Zorl.

Korday opened the full power of the Black Arts—hatred; fear; outrage; anger; prejudice; blood lust. They were all there. "Let us cast these vile ones off into oblivion! Do you not see, Elders of this holy Council? *These* are truly the minions of the Dragon of Darkness! *These* are they who are prophesied to die beneath the fires of the Golden Death! These are the False Ones! Let us decide now! Let us be one. Shall these live? They are but a mute, powerless heretic and a cowardly brute!"

The answering roar of condemnation exploded deafeningly.

Korday bowed his head, victory burning inside him. At last. *At last!* Korday indulged himself. He allowed the mob to rail on for minutes before easing off the black enchantments enough to regain their attention. Stepping to the front of the balcony, he gazed down triumphantly at the Mhyrnian and the Federationist ancestor to the Warriors of Light. He took a deep breath. Once these two were gone, he would be truly invincible. Not even the Vanguards could stop him.

His voice roared in power over the lingering din. "Look upon me, accused ones. It is the righteous judgement of this Council that you pretend to be the prophesied Ones. We of rightness and light discern that you are, in fact, the minions of the Dragon of Night. You seek to enslave the chosen world of Zorl. You hunger to destroy all."

He pointed at the Federationist. "You are a revealed enemy to all of Mhyrn. You are the *accursed* infidel!" He pointed at the Mhyrnian. "And you are but a mute wine bibber! You shame all who worship truth and light. You are the arch Apostate and no server of Zorl. Well, tremble and fear! The days of your power are at an end."

"You are both condemned to death! Execution of this sentence is to be exacted this very night—even now, lest you should somehow escape by means of your accursed arts of blackness."

"As has been prophesied, you a cowardly army or darkness, shall die beneath the power of the Golden Death. Prepare yourselves."

Korday gave Goren a sideward glance. He felt an answering link between Goren's machines and his hands. His fingers tingled with the power. Suddenly, Korday felt the High Judge at his elbow.

"Holy One," he whispered. "Surely you know the most immutable of our judicial laws! We must allow the condemned final words."

Korday almost shoved him off, but hesitated. Prudence, he thought. Prudence. He nodded, then taking a deep breath, spoke.

"In respect for that which is most revered among us, I allow final words." He almost smiled. "But we have heard enough from the Federationist. Only a voice of Mhyrn shall fill these halls evermore."

The room hushed. Korday eased off the dark enchantments. Why not? This was the highest court. The sentence was set. It was too late for any reprieve. There could be no escape now.

There was silence for a moment, then the Mhyrnian looked up and around at the assemblage.

"This is the Council that rules," the voice of the mute Mhyrnian was deep with softness. A sudden dread fell upon Korday. He began to tremble. It was as if he was back in the dungeon of the mummified bodies he had Goren destroy. He marveled. It was as if the families of the Most High Noblemen to the Great God yet lived in this man. Their power, even dead, twisted his bowels at the sound of each word.

"But I will say this. What is done to us is as a specter of what shall fall upon all among

you that condemn us. I say this now, so that if there are any left who fear the Creator, they must leave now. Flee, lest His wrath should fall upon you. That is all I have to say.

The silence burned. It was a stunned quiet that buzzed into a sudden commotion. Korday shivered up out of his anguish to see men and women from all over the hall scrambling from their seats. Some ran. Korday fired a barrage of Black Arts at them, but there was no slacking of resolve. There was no response of any sort. Something must be blocking the Black Arts. He looked down at the Holy Man and the Infidel and felt a strange *something*. He could not resolve it. Terrible dread and helplessness.

"Go, fools!" Korday jeered after the fleeing Mhyrnians. "There, indeed, shall be no place for you in the empire to follow. I know you all! I see your true allegiance now! There are others who will gladly take your place in this holy assemblage."

The hall fell silent. Korday touched his palms together for a moment, looking down upon the two. He opened his hands, raised them and unleashed Goren's fire upon them.

* * *

An inferno surrounded Palmer and Gaultor. Holocaust! But through the chrysalis Gaultor had shown him how to create, Palmer felt only uncomfortably hot—uncomfortable, but bearable. Perhaps part of this discomfort was due to all the clothing he wore—the Vanguard uniform beneath the Armor of Righteousness beneath the chrysalis, and over all this he wore the hooded, outer cloak. The latter he saw beginning to evaporate in scorched smoke. Palmer could only barely see Gaultor through the flames that swirled around them both. Now, Palmer's outer cloak was gone and he saw the Armor of Righteousness—the Eye that Reveals the Self, as Reeber had called it, begin to glow in its own dazzling white brilliance.

Suddenly, a gruesome scream screeched from the balcony. It seemed only vaguely human, making Palmer shiver at its horror.

"No!" the words whined, muffled within horrid gurglings. "But . . . I . . . g . g . g . got the . the . them all! I . . . Noooooo!"

The cry screeched like a tortured banshee, reaching upward into ear-piercing frequencies. The fires that stormed about Palmer and Gaultor suddenly swung upward, still spraying from the hands of the contorted figure of Coryhor on the balcony. The fountain of fire from his hands swept across the hall as the False One twisted and buckled in agony. Flames erupted everywhere, now—all but blasting white-hot wherever the sweeping fires touched. The other figure—the other infidel was smoldering and shuddering violently—as if every molecule of his huge frame were suddenly vibrating. Holes burned through his robes showing a swollen, clammy skin beneath which machinery sparked and frazzled. Coryhor retched, grasping for the railing. The motion swept away all six of the High chiefs and the High Judge in a single burst of flames. Abruptly, the False Infidel exploded in a spray of burning debris, and the fires from Coryhor's hands collapsed. He was muttering words among hysterical sobbings—words Palmer could not make out. His whole frame was glowing now—blue brilliance—the blue of Procyx! He arched upward, a final piercing screech escaping him and he burst outward in a spray of dazzling beads of light that clattered audibly onto the walls and floors of the Hall of Governance.

Horrible screamings echoed all about them. The chamber walls crunched and buckled. Whole sections of the room collapsed inward, mercifully crushing the burning humanity within as they scrambled to escape. More walls fell.

Gaultor reached out, keeping Palmer still. "Stay, " was all he said. "Do not be moved until

all this is done."

The hall fell utterly, crumbling into total decay in mere minutes. Afterward, the fires dwindled, leaving only a twisted shell of what had been. At the exact center of the ruin Palmer and Gaultor stood, mostly unscathed. Palmer's robe had subsided into darkness and was, in fact, sloughing into powder beneath the chrysalis. Gaultor turned and pulled the chrysalis off him quickly. When it was off, the Armor of Righteousness was nothing more than an ashen dust that mingled with the clear plastic of the discarded chrysalis.

"That Coryhor—he was one of the first of the evil ones," Gaultor said, removing his chrysalis as well. "The power of the Armor was consumed in the destruction of this pretender and his infidel. I hope we shall not have need of the Armor again before we are through, for we have nothing."

"Not quite," Palmer said, drawing the blaster Reeber had given him. He felt it hum briefly into readiness, then fall into silence again.

"That is good," Gaultor said, turning toward the temple of Zorl. "Let us finish this."

There were sounds of commotion beyond the ruins. Rescue crews were beginning to swarm over the ruins. Several passed by Palmer and Gaultor on a run, carrying supplies. No one seemed to notice them. Palmer followed Gaultor over the smoking debris up toward the temple. There was a sudden roar from overhead. Palmer looked up to see perhaps fifty KRAS fighters screaming off toward Markeeome. Beyond, higher up, he could see the battle ships and heavy cruisers that stood to guard the temple moving off in that direction as well. What was going on? Beyond this, only a pall of smoke from the fallen Hall of Governance expanded outward in the sky, deepening the golden moon that stood overhead into a dull rust. Palmer watched it casually for a moment, then looked down as he continued the climb out of the ruins. But he saw something at the exact moment he looked away that made him look again.

The moon was drifting. The stars were drifting, faster and faster. Palmer stopped Gaultor, pointing it out and as they regarded the sight the moon and stars fell. It was as though they had slipped on a sheet of ice, falling below the horizon.

Realization struck Palmer with a familiar, stabbing fear. Hypermotility! Mhyrn had just fallen into Hypermotility!

"Not here . . ." Palmer said, shaking suddenly. Every terror and anguish came flooding back into him—the death of Evanna; the crushed form of Dr. Krolich beneath the Sutherland-Zeiss megascope; the tornadoes that bore down of the ferryship just moments before it lifted in its search for Cosgrove and the Ahrgolians.

Palmer stumbled into a run that quickly passed Gaultor. "We've got to get everyone off." He clamored up the rubble, almost blindly. "Those warships—they could be used to evacuate. Families first, if possible—but if not . . ."

The sound of distant explosions distracted him for a moment. He turned to see the flickers of blasts in the air above and about the peaks of Markeeome. A battle. A battle? Now? When the world is falling apart? They were worried about some cursed, petty conflict? Gaultor arrived beside him, taking his arm in a strong grasp. Palmer turned to look at him. For a moment, it was as though the Mhyrnian was a complete stranger to him, and then—then as he looked into Gaultor's face other memories swirled before the gaze of the seer that was Martin Palmer: A city of splendor, hovering above a mountain and crowned with a pillar of radiant flames; a kind mentor named Methuselah who led his thinking through the perils of piloting a Vanguard between the black hole binary where the deepest evil had sought to bring him down and failed. At these, the fear was smothered by a peace so grand that Palmer now found himself not caring

where he and Gaultor went or what might to happen to them. Here, now, was strength and Palmer's mind cleared with sudden starkness. The temple! They must reach the temple!

More rescue teams scurried past them. Again, Palmer wondered that none of these people seemed the slightest bit concerned with them. He turned to look back at Markeeome. Massive explosions blistered within its swirling cloud formations. He could see the distant shapes of battleships and cruisers locked in fierce conflict.

A sudden gust of wind came up and nearly blew him and Gaultor over. The sky churned with storm clouds that had sprung up from nowhere. A spattering of raindrops stung Palmer's face. Now he grasped Gaultor by the arm and started down the outside pile of debris toward the courtyard that separated the fallen Hall of Governance from the Temple of Zorl.

The earth shook suddenly. Instinctively, Palmer turned, grabbed hold of Gaultor and pulled him down to lie flat. The quake rumbled twisting buildings askew before ripping them to shreds.

The pall of new death hung above the city.

When the quake ended, Palmer and Gaultor were again on their feet. Behind them, Palmer glanced the swirling birth of a tornado blistering down from dark, black clouds. Its terrible funnel silhouetted against a sudden burst of bizarre lightning as it reached down its grotesque tentacle to begin a mutilating run across the city. A sudden flash of lightning ignited ahead in the courtyard where emergency vehicles had and were gathering.

A spinning, cutting whine cut across the growing moanings and whistles of the wind. Palmer turned to see a sleek, grotesque ship of black metals, hovering above the parkway. A sudden, halting recognition came, then. He *knew* the builder of such demonic vessels. Palmer had fought a mental battle with him between the twin, harbor black holes of a distant galaxy.

Beams of dark, brown energy slashed out at the vehicles below, tearing them to flaming shreds. As Palmer watched, more of these hideous craft appeared above the first. These new arrivals opened fire as well, but this time at the temple. But here, the dark energies had no effect. The pluridium of the massive, conical structure drank up the rays. There was no damage that could be discerned.

Now squadrons of Mhyrnian KRAS fighters attacked the dark ships. Complete barrages of depolarizer beams and shredder smart bombs passed over Echion's hideous ships as harmlessly as their energies had over the temple. A single, answering swath of dark rays removed all the KRAS fighters while another salvo of beams from the fighters below tried to break into the temple again.

Palmer looked at the blaster Reeber had given him. He nearly tossed it aside. What could it possibly do against such ships as these?

A brilliant explosion drew his attention to the courtyard. All the rescue ships were gone, tugged upward in the fireball of a rising mushroom that briefly engulfed then passed beyond the dark ships. Palmer tugged at Gaultor and together they ran to a large outcropping of girders and stone.

More dark ships arrived. They broadcast new beams that began scanning the rubble of the Hall of Governance—twisting beams of dark greenish-brown. Palmer watched one of the beams pass over one of the unconscious rescue team, lying face down in the nearby rubble. The beam narrowed onto his head. A few seconds later, the body shivered then heaved, twisting unnaturally. The skin crackled off the body like pealing ash leaving only a skeleton. The beam opened wide again, continuing its probing across the debris.

A new quake shuddered the earth, halfway tipping the finger of stone and metal Palmer

and Gaultor hid behind. Shuffling rock and girders slid down toward them from the piled ruins above. Overhead, new tornadoes slung free from the turbulent, bulging clouds overhead. Palmer huddled up against the back of the stone. How could they survive any of this? If these demon ships didn't find them and destroy them as they had the Mhyrnian rescue team, then Hypermotility would. He looked aside to see Gaultor, his eyes closed—head bent . . . in prayer. *At this point*, Palmer thought, *not a bad plan*. After a moment, he silently joined the Mhyrnian—in intent at least.

His thoughts took the form of anxious pleadings with a god he now believed actually existed—the god of the Mhyrnians; the god of the Vanguards; the god of the City of Unity that stood in the air above Serenity—they were the same being.

Palmer's attempts to communicate were both childlike and complex: stuttering stumbles—splashes of emotions and hopes; fervent, mental cries for help intermingled with Palmer wondering what he could do to escape. Through all this, he kept open a wary eye for any imperative trouble.

Suddenly, one of the gathering tornadoes swept down into the courtyard. Palmer looked up to see the all the demon ships sucked in and caught up inside it. They were immediately tossed around within the supersonic vortices like weightless leaves.

Something prodded his mind to action.

He grabbed Gaultor and sprinted down the ruins, into the courtyard and straight for the funnel cloud.

Above him, insanely intense forks of lightnings almost continually struck the tousled demon ships. The tornado had, in fact, stopped its aimless wanderings over the grounds. It merely hung in a single place, whirling and mixing the ships about. The roar of it was deafening.

The courtyard was several hundred meters across. It seemed far longer than that to Palmer as he and Gaultor began their crossing, finally skirting the tornado and pushing forward toward the temple. Blast craters, upended statues, and trees slowed their progress. Patches of persistent fire further diverted them from a straight course.

A brilliant flash of orange yanked Palmer's view upward. Two of the demon ships had apparently collided within the whirlwind. Their fiery deaths were spectacularly amplified by the cyclone. The flames caught and twisted in the winds, illuminating the entire tornado. For a dazzling, fleeting second it was a pillar of fire.

Gaultor pulled him away from the spectacle. They ran on until, at last, they stood at the base of the temple of Zorl.

A long stairway that crisscrossed back and forth climbed the huge wall of the temple before them at about a fifteen-degree incline. It looked like it went up ten stories before reaching an ornate, canopy-covered balcony.

"Is this where we go? Palmer shouted hoarsely above the roar of the tornado.

Gaultor answered yes with an eager nod. "Up at the gates we can use the key to get inside. It is the only way in."

Palmer nodded, remembering the amulet Methuselah had given them. They were just about to start up when a massive quake shook them to the ground. Behind them, the earth fissured open and jets of flame-engulfed smoke shot upward hundreds of meters into the air. Rocks and ruins slid down into the fiery crevasse, flashing yellow hot splashes from beneath.

Palmer knew all too well that quakes could dislodge the unpredictable super weather of Hypermotility. He glanced quickly at the tornado that tossed and mixed the strange demon ships about inside it. It *had* started wobbling a little. For a moment he wondered: two of the demon

ships had collided and destroyed each other inside the tornado. He couldn't imagine that ships of such power did not have potent shielding capabilities. How could a mere collision have ruined them? And then Palmer remembered that Dr. Varl, back on the ferryship, had speculated about temporal distortions due to Hypermotility. Could such minute skewering of the fabric of time have ruined the shielding?

The whirlwind grew ever more unstable. Palmer and Gaultor crawled to their feet and commenced a long, running climb up the stairway.

At each turnabout point there stood a small gardened and fenced terrace adorned with benches and numerous places for torches to burn. Each terrace they came to was empty of people, and though each torch holder cradled and ornate torch, none were lit. Ceremonial? Probably—probably set for this very moment, when the Holy Man and the Infidel were to climb and enter the temple.

Another quake rumbled the ground. Palmer heard it but felt nothing. A moment later, the stairway beneath them glowed ever so slightly for a second or two, then darkened again. That must be the pluridium at work, Palmer surmised. Properly constructed at the atomic level, pluridium could take in any force or energy and instantly change it into any other force or energy. As he thought about this, Palmer began to understand at least one reason why the Vanguards had been constructed of solid pluridium. It could make them virtually invincible. Here—now it looked like the quake had hit the solid pluridium temple, and the building had absorbed the quake's kinetic energy and kicked it back out as light. No wonder the demon ships had failed to do anything to the temple with their dark rays. But what had all that absorbed power been changed into?

The clatter of newly stirred debris exploded from the courtyard below. The struggling whinings of overdriven engines from above heralded the dislodging and weakening of the tornado's grip on the demon ships. Three of the vessels already stabilized themselves as the whirlwind shifted and turned across the ground in renewed, aimless wanderings. Palmer looked up the stairway and saw that Gaultor was nearly a full story ahead of him. It was dangerous to be separated. Palmer sprinted up after him, holding his hand weapon ready.

A sudden knife of dark, brown energy slashed across the stairway ahead of him. Palmer lurched backward out of its path, nearly losing his balance in the process. The moment his footing was sure, Palmer started up again in a full run. He sensed other rays coming down—felt their vile radiation.

He could not see Gaultor now. A new beam touched the stairs some twenty meters ahead of him. It spread wide into a fan shape that completely blocked the stairway up. Palmer slowed, looking up. A pair of similar rays shone down on the flight above him. These were slowly beginning to close toward each other. Palmer looked back down the stairs below him. Another ray had fanned out behind him, blocking him from running down the steps. He glanced back to the flight above. The rays still narrowed. He looked at the beam on the stairs ahead of him. It was drifting toward him while the one behind him was moved up the steps. Trapped. No escape. Palmer looked up toward the ships. The rays poured from two demon ships that hovered above the flaming fissure of the courtyard. Lightning struck the ships occasionally. The tornado had long since moved on, although others could be seen in the distance, wrecking the city beyond.

Palmer remembered the futility of the KRAS fighters attacks against these ships. Whole fleets of Mhyrnian, state-of-the-art battle vessels had been completely wiped out in the battle at Markeeome.

What could he do now?

Palmer thought of the hand weapon Reeber had given him, but only in frustration. What could a blaster do against these? And then, as the fanned rays of dark, brown death closed finally toward him, he thought, *What do have we to lose?* He raised the weapon and fired at the lowest ship.

Time slowed abruptly. As Palmer looked upward at the demon ships, he could see the dark ray moving slowly back and forth in the scanning process that was making it a fan shape. It moved back and forth slowly—so slow, in fact, that Palmer decided he could easily walk past it. He looked back at the ships. For a brief few seconds space itself seemed to close into a churning tunnel around him and the blaster. Now he saw the dark rays that had been closing on him bend abruptly inward toward his weapon, narrowing to needle thickness and touching the weapon at its tip. The whole blaster sparkled with a rush of tiny silver sparks and then began glowing—first a dull red, then amber and finally gold.

Time began accelerating again. Palmer looked up to see the demon ship that had been firing on him begin to turn away from the attack when a dazzling, white spot touched its side. Minute sparks began flowing across the fuselage. Bursts of hot, blue flames erupted from blistering fissures that spread across the black fighter until finally it exploded—a deafening, flanging crack that sprayed debris outward in an expanding ring of fire.

Palmer did not have time to wonder at it. He turned his blaster on the ship that poured its dark energies on the flight of stairs above him. This time, there was an immediate explosion.

The squadron of demon ships beyond opened fire in a full, responding barrage, but now the blaster took a life of its own. It moved of itself, turning and firing of its own accord on ship after ship.

The sky filled with bursting detonations. It was as if a hundred fireworks had exploded all within the space of a few seconds. The crack of explosions echoed across the courtyard as the blaster returned to his hand. Palmer didn't have time to wonder at the technology. Clutching the weapon thankfully, he turned and went on.

Debris still spattered down on the stairway as Palmer ran up after Gaultor. He found the Mhyrnian on the flight above him, as he had suspected.

Palmer tired rapidly. He had had nothing to eat for nearly a day and the emotional strain of the trial, and their escape first from the Hall of Governance, then across the courtyard and finally from the demon ships, was dragging him quickly toward exhaustion. He panted, his side aching as he ran up the steps, and he wondered. He knew he was in far better shape than this. Why should it hit him now—this exhaustion bordering on giving up? Part of him didn't really care if he made it to the top, now. Another part of him, urgent to the point of desperation, still held the upper hand. Palmer ran on.

Gaultor was ahead of him again. How could the Mhyrnian have so much more energy? Palmer called to him over the winds—yelling hoarsely to slow down and wait for him. The Mhyrnian seemed not to hear him. After a third, seemingly futile attempt, Gaultor turned and, understanding, waited.

When they rounded the last flight leading up to the balcony and the gates to the temple, Gaultor could not restrain himself. His stride picked up once more and he pulled ahead. Palmer was dizzy, his head pounding. He pushed forward with half the energy he needed to keep up with Gaultor, but it was all he could muster. What was wrong? Why didn't he have more strength?! He glanced aside as he half ran, half staggered up the steps—watching dutifully, albeit it dully, for the appearance of any more of the demon ships. All he saw was meandering tornadoes and strangely blown fires from the city. The ruined buildings looked like grotesque fingers and hands

clawing up from a dark horizon. Lightning flashes and thunder pulsed almost continually.

The top of the stairs was just ahead. Palmer could not see Gaultor. He picked up his stride with blind determination, crossing the last few steps with immutable resolve.

Palmer's right hand suddenly stung with searing agony. He felt the blaster drop from his grip and saw a black, shiny rope wrap itself around the hand gun and pull it away with lightning speed. Astonished, Palmer followed it with his eyes and saw it disappear beneath the canopy into the shadows. Alert now, he dropped into the Kyrellian Battle Stance.

The shadows of the canopy fell away as his concentrated vision showed a humanoid form standing in the darkness. Its eyes, long and red glowed above a reptilian face. He saw slight motion at the shoulder weapon it brandished and leapt aside.

The dark beam knifed exactly where he had stood, missing him by millimeters. Peripherally, Palmer saw Gaultor crouching against the far wall, hiding behind a row of pluridium thrones—safe for the moment. Palmer lit on the ground and sprang again, whirling head over heels in the air in a flip that was, again, barely missed by a new discharge. He leapt again in a tumble that would take him behind the thrones and directly next to Gaultor. Again, the beam missed him by mere fractions. It pulsed harmlessly against the pluridium.

Palmer, exhausted, passed out.

* * *

When he awoke, his hand was numb and swollen. Gaultor continued to crouch beside him. There were no new firings of the dark beam. The storms of Hypermotility raged all about the temple of Zorl. After a moment of disorientation, Palmer remembered where they were. He entered the Kyrellian Battle Stance once more, but this time opened his powers of Seership as well.

Through the chairs he saw the dark creature. It was like one of the spawn of Echion back at the Harbor black holes—exactly like them: reptilian head upon a powerful, weaving neck that was supported by an incredibly muscular, humanoid body. Tentacles poured forth from its sides that spread across the floor in a fan shape, perhaps ten meters in all directions. It had put down its own weapon and was examining the blaster it had snapped away from Palmer.

There could be no more perfect moment. Palmer watched the tentacles carefully—watched the beast—waited until the precise instant of least defensibility of the demon and then pulling strength from the discipline of the Stance, leapt above and across the thrones, landing only once, halfway to the creature and then springing high and fast at it again.

The thing saw him. Without hesitation it lifted Palmer's blaster and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Palmer slammed into the chest of the beast, sending it crashing backward against the pluridium wall behind. Palmer kicked upward in his recovering twist to slam a boot hard into the thing's face. A moment later, springing backward for yet another flying assault, Palmer felt one of the tentacles brush against his boot. His leg immediately began to tingle. He would have only seconds before his leg was completely useless. He paused for a mere moment in setting up for a new jump. He was utterly tired now. This must be a fatal blow, for there would be no more opportunities. He reached down for the final dregs of power within him and sprang upward and forward.

The creature whirled and leapt aside but only far enough to bring its clawed hands into a searing, horizontal plane. As Palmer spun about in the air trying to compensate, he saw the

claws spring up and felt the searing pain of them plunge deep into the back of his skull—but it was only for a moment. Blackness closed upon him.

I I

Reeber stared through the cube in disbelief and horror. Palmer lay in a spreading pool of blood at the feet of the demon. Lightning flashed in a terrible barrage while thunderings rolled and clashed bizarrely.

His heart pounded painfully in his chest. This couldn't be happening! He began pacing about, breathing in short and dizzying breaths. He went back to the cube in mid pace. The demon had picked up its weapon and was walking toward the row of thrones. One of its tentacles, coiled upward to its body, holding the blaster Reeber had given Palmer, clenching it there like a great treasure.

Where was Gaultor?!

Suddenly, as if reading Reeber's thoughts, the cube altered its perspective to show the Holy Man hiding behind the thrones, looking about in desperation for some escape. The demon fired its weapon in a continual discharge, now. The pluridium absorbed the energy as Reeber had seen it do when the dark ships had had them pinned.

Guilt flooded Reeber, mixing sourly with the paralyzing fear that had kept him from doing anything but watch. Things had gone well once Palmer had destroyed the dark ships, but then the demon had appeared at the gate of the temple . . . Surely, the blaster could have destroyed the thing. It should have. He was certain it could have had the demon not taken it away before Palmer could bring it to bear. From that point on, the end of the battle was certain, regardless of Palmer's incredible fighting methods. The demon was all but invincible.

"What can I do?" Reeber whispered, perspiring freely. Palmer's dead. It's all over. I can't . . ."

An idea suddenly flashed into Reeber's mind. He turned to look at the crystal case behind him. Inside was another blaster. It was exactly like the one Morse had given him, only completely transparent. He looked back into the cube again. Gaultor was considering slipping down over the edge of the balcony to drop to the flight of steps directly beneath. Reeber shook his head, glancing back at the crystal case again. After a moment, it seemed to be the only way. His heart still pounding with fear, Reeber went to the case. It opened at his approach. At its opening, he immediately knew how everything inside worked. He reached for one of the white belts he had seen earlier and strapped it on. Next, he pulled the blaster from its holster.

"For the Warriors of Light," Kishkor had said. Reeber laughed nervously at the thought of Clement Reeber as a Warrior of Light, but he turned resolutely and went back to the cube. He looked down at the crystal controls mounted on the buckle of the white belt. Pressing the right one, he heard a quiet, swelling whine that rose and fell at last into silence. A moment later, he felt himself lift from the floor ever so slightly. He looked down at the blaster, held so uncomfortably within his beefy hands. It glowed to golden life. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the control on the cube and stepped into the air above the temple of Zorl.

Winds howled wickedly about him. Reeber fought an immediate vertigo, nearly dropping the blaster. He clamped his eyes shut. Although the winds blew against him, it felt as though he were standing on solid ground.

He had to hurry! There could be no more time wasted on this dizziness nonsense! Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes to the wind—squinting in them, really. Reeber oriented himself. He hovered in the squalls and winds perhaps thirty meters above the canopy. He could see Gaultor, moving to climb over the edge. He could see the demon, stepping closer—wary but determined—his dark, brown beam still firing continuously. It could, Reeber had observed, do nothing to the temple itself, but once the energy touched living tissue . . .

Suddenly, the demon stopped. It paused, turning its head about—sniffing. Reeber's heart pounded in his throat. The demon looked up at him.

There could be no misses—not with something like this. Reeber lifted his weapon clumsily, holding it at arm's length. The blaster shook visibly in his hands. He grabbed hold of it with his other hand, trying to steady the shaking.

Now! He kept telling himself—kept screaming at himself within his mind. The creature started swinging its deadly rifle up toward him. "Now, curse it!"

He saw that Gaultor could see him now as well.

Reeber pulled the trigger.

A dazzling spot of white brilliance flashed on the wall next to the creature. Reeber had missed. The creature swung the beam upward. Frozen with fear, part of Reeber watched the deadly beam slash toward him with unfeeling, intellectual remoteness. It was death, Reeber knew was coming to him now.

The fear drained away. Adrenaline flowed through him and his mind and body suddenly cleared. His hands stopped shaking. Death was at the doors. He took careful aim and fired again.

The blaster began to sing. That was the only word Reeber could find to describe it. The transparent weapon began to glow, as if alive with a dazzling, inner fire barely contained within its crystalline shell. The dark beam of the creature's rifle bent suddenly inward and was soaked up completely by Reeber's shining blaster. That was it. There was no damage to Reeber of any sort. His weapon sang and shone like a golden sun—bright as if on the verge of exploding. But below, the white spot of blinding radiance that was the point of impact from the blaster found its mark on the creature's head. The grotesque, reptilian face burst into flame. The creature dropped its weapon, the tentacles coiling in to the body like the release of tense springs. The demon lurched onto its back, its legs and arms writhing and thrashing in twisting contortions—more spider than a humanoid. The flames blossomed into white-hot fury, spreading quickly until the demon was engulfed in them.

Reeber watched in gruesome fascination until the creature and its weapon were utterly consumed. When the flames subsided, nothing remained but bizarre bones smoldering among the rust-colored shells of dark engines that had lived within the thing. Palmer's Acrucian blaster rested unscathed on the temple balcony.

Palmer! Reeber craned to see as the golden singing of his blaster fell away. He flew past the still smoking remains of the creature to land smoothly beside the body of The Infidel.

Gaultor was already there. He knelt beside the Palmer, oblivious to Reeber. A dark pool of blood surrounded Palmer on the ground. Reeber eagerly felt the throat for a pulse. Long moments passed. Gaultor waited motionless. Thunder rolled from beyond the canopy. Lightning flashed in strange colors and the roar of the winds was a baleful moaning. The Mhyrnian's expression fell into unmistakable anguish and grief. He carefully turned Palmer over, looking down into his face. Palmer's eyes were open, staring. His pupils were large. Gaultor suddenly lowered his head, then fell forward, clinging the limp body to up to him. Reeber watched as the Holy Man held Palmer to him like a child.

Minutes passed. Reeber heard the ground quaking behind him. He stood, turning to look out at the horrors of planetary death churning beyond the balcony. Twisting billows of smoke and fire poured into the air from new fissures in the earth. Impossible storm eddies snared and whirled them about. Except for sporadic flashes of lightning, the sky was utterly black with clouds. Reeber turned to Gaultor again. He felt an overwhelming urgency to action—to destroy Procyx now.

"Gaultor," Reeber said, kneeling down beside him. "We must go on."

The Holy Man turned on him. "All is lost! The Evil One is truly victorious! We are *both* needed to destroy the Procyx—Both! Don't you understand?" He looked down at Palmer's face. "He gave everything . . . Again, he gave everything to save my life. And he is dead! "

"Isn't there something you can do? Another who can be given power to do his task? I have heard of great powers you Holy Men possess . . ."

"Yes," Gaultor said. "There is a power I can use." He reflected for a time amid the whining winds and tortured thunder. "Yes," he said finally. "No matter what was said, I must do this."

He turned to Reeber. "And you, my friend, are the only one who must ever know of what I do now. Swear to me that you will tell no one."

"I don't understand . . ."

"Swear you will tell no one of this—not one living soul, for as long as your life remains. Quickly! As you say, the time draws in upon us."

"I . . . I . . . very well. I promise it." Reeber was utterly confused. What could Gaultor be talking about? He watched as Gaultor gently took Palmer's hands in his own. Gaultor bent his head and began speaking softly in Mhyrnese.

Lightnings coursed across the skies beyond the temple in continuous, brilliant displays. Answering thunders echoed from the far ruins of the Outer City of Zorl.

Reeber looked back at Gaultor. His hands glowed as if translucent and tiny golden sparks flashed between Gaultor's hands and Palmer's. The Mhyrnian's words fell away into quiet sobbings. Reeber drew closer.

Palmer began to breathe. Reeber backed away, incredulous. The golden sparklings spread to intricate, shining webbings of power. Palmer shifted his weight. The blood beneath him—on his uniform—disappeared. Gaultor released his hold on Palmer and quickly lowered him to the ground, then bent over him as if he had just been trying to awaken him. Palmer opened his eyes. Within seconds, he sat upright. Gaultor steadied him.

"It is over," Gaultor said. "Our friend, here, destroyed the demon when your final attack failed."

Palmer felt the back of his neck suddenly, fumbling his fingers through his hair at the base of his skull. "But I . . ." He suddenly saw Gaultor's hands in a flash of lightning. They were burned and beginning to blister. Seeing this, Gaultor spoke quickly.

"I, unfortunately, did not escape completely. The demon's power is formidable. I have been injured as a result. But it is nothing."

"I must heal you," Palmer sat up now, reaching out to take the Mhyrnian's hands in his.

"No, my brother. Do you not remember the charge we received? We must not use the power of the Golden Death at all except to remove Procyx—you remember that command?"

"Yes." Palmer nodded slowly. "But you are injured . . ."

"I am fine. The Creator will give me what is required." Gaultor smiled. Palmer stood.

III

Palmer could remember only his final attack upon the demon spawn of Echion. He turned to look at Reeber, standing silently behind them as Gaultor approached. The heavy man, girthed about by a white belt and holding the clear blaster, stared at him in silence. Lightning flashed. Was his face wet? He couldn't be sure. Gaultor turned to Reeber as well.

"Now, my friend. Return and bring us the sacred plate. The time of salvation is come."

Palmer watched Reeber turn in silence. The same, rippling gold aura that had attended him when he had come to the prison cell appeared behind Reeber and he disappeared into it. Palmer saw the blaster the demon had taken from him amidst the skeletal ruins of the beast, unharmed—not even scorched. He reached down, picked it up and holstered it. A moment later, Reeber stepped onto the balcony again. He held the Coss plate and handed it to Gaultor.

"It is for the Infidel to carry," Gaultor replied, not taking it. Reeber handed it over. A flood of kinship overwhelmed Palmer at this. Gaultor smiled at him more warmly than he could ever remember. Here, now, they were truly one. It was as if they were, at this moment, standing in the great city of unity that had stood above Serenity. Palmer felt all those amazing feelings of joy and warmth he had felt there, here, now with Gaultor and with Reeber.

The ground shuddered anew beyond the temple. Gaultor turned to Reeber and bowing said, "You must return to safety, now. I salute you—he who holds that which is sacred unto the end."

Reeber straightened slightly. Something passed between them—some shared something. Palmer wondered at it only in passing. Reeber shook hands with Palmer and disappeared again into the golden aura.

The gates of the temple were actually two massive doors that looked as if they could slide open. Their surfaces were polished to a near mirror finish and held no adornments other than a depression at shoulder height, which straddled where the two doors met. Palmer smiled when he saw it. He knew its shape: a double-notched arrowhead. Gaultor opened his robe, detached the amulet he wore from its chain, and pressed it into the identically-shaped depression. The moment the Great Key slipped into full contact with the gate, there were sounds that resonated from beyond the doors. Gaultor took the key out and handed it to Palmer.

"Hold this until I tell you otherwise," he said. Palmer nodded silently. The doors slid open before them.

Lights came on from within a large antechamber beyond. Here, the walls seemed covered in gold. Palmer could not see any particular source for the lighting. It seemed merely to come from everywhere equally. Directly before them on a wall that reached up several stories was a mural. On it was portrayed a dazzling, blue star. Below the star hovered a shining, green tree and above the star hovered a pillar of flames. People gathered beneath the tree, all reaching upward toward it. The pillar of fire opened into a sea of light. Palmer was taken by it. The blue star was Procyx. Of that, he had no doubt. But the other things—what were they? He was about to open his Seership to see beyond the images when Gaultor urged him to follow.

The antechamber led off into two hallways at opposite ends of the room and perpendicular to the entrance. They took the doorway to the left. This led down a long hallway, lit by softly the glowing floor and ceiling. The walls were covered with more murals, each depicting scenes of wonder not unlike those Palmer had scene back at the Place of Hope in the roof of Markeeome. At last they came to a veiled entrance. The sound of falling water could be heard from beyond it

and the very fabric, gossamer and shimmering with golden webbings, seemed to glow of itself. Here, Gaultor knelt, and then stood three times in a row, then reverently, he parted the curtain.

The interior of the temple was a large body of water. Falls poured fresh into the small lake from varying heights. A single ring of polished, white stone perhaps a hundred meters wide surrounded the water. The massive size of the temple was made to seem even larger, for the ceiling above was lost in dimness—a kilometer and a half straight up. There were stepped terraces rising above the ring of stone. These were graced with growing plants and vines—vines again like those Palmer had seen in the Place of Hope—the vines from which the pillar of fire had been fueled.

Crossing the lake were two great arches of pluridium. These came together in the center, forming an X as seen from above. Railings lined the arches. Gaultor surveyed the temple then headed for the nearest arch.

When they arrived, Palmer saw that the arch was actually a ramp with protective railings lining its sides. The Mhyrnian started across without hesitation, moving with determination toward the center at a brisk pace. Palmer followed closely, still looking around him in wonder.

"How long has this temple stood?" Palmer asked as they moved along.

"It is old beyond anything now standing." Gaultor replied.

"But it all seems so new. The air here is fresh, and the plants—how could they live without sunlight?"

"There is always light here," Gaultor said. "Here, the light is as pure as any light when it leaves the place of all light to pass through stars and moons until it reaches us."

Palmer examined Gaultor's hands. The burns were not as extensive as they had been when he had unleashed the Golden Death against the outlaw combine fleets, but there *were* blisters and scorch marks, especially on the palms. Palmer winced when he saw them.

A thin disk of pluridium hovered at the crossing of the ramps. As Gaultor and Palmer stepped over onto it, Palmer looked over the edge into the waters beneath. Light. There was light spreading from some unguessable source deep beneath the surface of the water. It was a golden light—quiet, remote but real. Palmer felt a sudden surge of expectation upon seeing. It was the same gold as that of his uniform when it had glowed aboard the Vanguard Gabriel. He turned and saw Gaultor struggling against the pain of his burns standing at the exact center of the disk. When he saw that Palmer was watching him, his expression shifted.

"Come," he said. "Now it the time of salvation."

Palmer went up to stand beside him.

"Place the Great Key in the depression on the plate, as I did at the gates to the temple."

Palmer looked at the plate. At its center was a depression exactly like the one on the temple doors, as Gaultor had said. It was surrounded by twelve rows of hieroglyphs. Carefully, he placed the Great Key into the depression.

A single, pure brilliance of tone—"A" above middle "C" sounded. It swelled to fill the great hall, echoing and reverberating from its farthest corners. Palmer flinched as the plate levitated from his hands to hover in the air. The rows of hieroglyphs were glowing, each a different color and sequencing in rapid patterns.

From beneath, Palmer heard the waters begin to stir. All about them the lake began to churn. The four archways began retracting slowly, the central disk attached to the end of one followed it toward the ring of stone that circumvented the interior of the massive, cone-shaped temple of Zorl. The hovering plate and key remained at the exact center but were now beginning to shine a brilliant gold color—the same gold Palmer had seen before: The Golden Death.

The waters of the lake thrashed in a great vortex—a whirlpool. Suddenly, from the very depths of the water, blinding flames leapt upward in a blast of incredible radiance. They spread outward and soon the waters themselves burned with them. Palmer and Gaultor stood on the platform, surrounded by the firestorm, yet they felt none of its heat. The plate vanished suddenly in a flash of white and something caught Palmer's eye—motion from within the flames at the center of the vortex.

A perfect needle of pluridium was rising from the churning depths. Palmer watched it, transfixed. It broadened as it rose. From above Palmer heard the sound of massive machinery. The conical ceiling of the temple retracted in twelve equal sections—like pulling a pie apart by its twelve pieces. The thunderous horrors of Hypermotility flashed without, lightning repeatedly striking the sections of ceiling as they retracted into the hidden recesses of the temple that must extend kilometers down into the earth.

The rising point of gleaming lavender continued upward amidst the flaming whirlpool. The point had opened into a tear-shape now, narrowing again to a stem that was still partially encased within the vortex—a massive form that rivaled any building that had stood beyond in the city before Hypermotility had begun ruining it. The great, rising structure of pluridium turned slowly. Ninety degrees into its turn, Palmer recognized what it was: The nose section of a Vanguard. This must be it. The Vanguard Zorl.

The flames of the spinning waters shot upward into the night in an explosive blast. As Palmer watched the firestorm shoot upward toward the stratosphere, the terrible black storm clouds above parted before them, revealing a night sky filled with the incredible auroras of Hypermotility.

Abruptly, everything flashed a brilliant green and Palmer found himself standing alone on the bridge of the Vanguard Zorl. He had materialized at the very apex of the same sort of crystalline double helix tower the Gabriel had. The vessel rose vertically, but Palmer saw the receding temple walls as if they opened horizontally before the nose of the ship. He looked down and about him. Here, beneath and surrounding the helm, fantastic, crystal structures and systems of structures all but filled the massive, domed command area of the bridge. Each clustering complex pulsed with its own, faint, inner glow of golden light.

No room for other crew, here? Just the two of them—a pilot—and . . . and Gaultor? Gaultor! Where was he? Palmer turned about searching and not seeing him, called his name.

"I am here below," Gaultor's voice spoke inside his head. Palmer opened his Seership. He looked back across the aft part of the huge ship, still rising from the awesome vortex of burning temple waters. Palmer found Gaultor standing on a dais at the very center of the great, quadrangle aft section of the vessel. Here was another significant difference in ship design. The Gabriel's aft had been an open framed quadrangle shape. The Zorl's was completely enclosed. The floor, walls and ceilings formed an enormous chamber about Gaultor. Their surfaces were marked with a honeycombed pattern of crystalline pluridium. As with the formations and devices surrounding Palmer on the bridge, each hexagonal jewel glowed with a living, dim golden illumination.

The Zorl continued to rise from the searing waters. The domed bridge now cleared the still retracting ceiling of the massive, conical structure. Lightning struck frenetically at the great starship through the churning tunnel of fire through which it rose majestically toward the stars.

Palmer looked back across the remainder of the Zorl for signs of any other crew to assist them. Perhaps there might be other holy ones prepared to join in this effort. But none were here now. Except for what looked like living quarters and facilities for two individuals, the Vanguard

Zorl was completely filled with the same sorts of glowing devices that surrounded Palmer on the bridge. They defied all logic and understanding. To Palmer they seemed both technological and . . . and what? Artistic? Psycho kinetic, perhaps? Spiritual? He could only vaguely guess. It was obvious to him that these machines were made to function in realms and disciplines beyond anything humanity could even imagine existed, let alone manipulate. He felt a surge of wonder and excitement. Here *was* a power that could oppose the incomprehensible.

"Martin," Gaultor called Palmer's mind. His tone, though gentle, was filled with urgency. "Take us above Mhyrn as soon as we fully clear the resting place."

Quickly, Palmer turned and climbing into the helm, placed his hands on the same two guidance spheres the Vanguard Gabriel's helm possessed.

The massive vessel blistered to blazing life. The throbbings and singing powers Palmer had heard aboard the Gabriel swelled into full illumination. Wandering webbings of golden light began rippling across the Zorl. The engines rumbled and whined toward *whiteness*. The filaments of light sparked into flashes of yellow and amber lightnings that poured outward, freely overwhelming any forks of electricity Hypermotility might deal the ship. Abruptly, the pillar of fire that had sheathed the Zorl evaporated into smoke. The Vanguard was at last clear of the temple. The building's huge machinery was closing behind the starship.

The rise of the Zorl was as smooth as if it were gliding across wet ice. The Vanguard's pluridium hull hungrily drank in the kinetic powers of supersonic winds. Tornadoes were sucked in whole and the skies about the Vanguard cleared ever farther and farther away.

Suddenly, the horizon flashed brilliantly. Palmer turned to see Markeeome radiant with brilliant arcings of silver energy. From its very pinnacle, a new pillar of flames rose into the heavens. Within it shone a single point of blinding white. Palmer's Seership revealed this point of light, so distant from the Zorl, to be a man—no, a boy that was almost a man. His hands were extended outward as he rose within the fires, higher and higher. He stood atop the flames. Abruptly, beneath the boy's feet, the firestorm began to splash outward in a whirling maelstrom of golden power. It looked like a galaxy of golden diadems was spreading as it turned beneath the boy. It reached far across the heavens. Everywhere beneath and above this *ceiling* of golden, pin-wheeling glories tornado clusters disappeared; lightnings stopped with chilling immediacy; the shakings of the earth ceased as if quelled by the placing of a steadying hand. The horrors of Hypermotility fell suddenly still.

These golden stormings spread just beneath the Zorl. It was a dazzling tidal wave that coursed across the planet as the Vanguard rose toward the stars.

The limb of Mhyrn shone with golden brilliance—an arc of scintillating light. The very clouds and seas shone with their own, matchless radiance. The sight filled Palmer with a joy so intense he almost lost control of the Zorl. But a voice, still and soft within him, pulled him back.

"The task, my brother. The task yet lies ahead." It was the same sort of voice Palmer had felt on the Gabriel. "Yes," It replied kindly. "You are right. I am the Zorl. I am one with you and the Holy Man. Yes, I see his name within you. Gaultor."

The Vanguard, scintillating in its golden energies, hung above the shining world. Palmer hesitated, turning to Gaultor again."

"Come below," the Mhyrnian said, his voice suddenly tired and yet anxious. "I need your help before we proceed further."

Palmer climbed off the helm and then hesitated. "How do I come?"

"Think it," the Vanguard answered him. "Think it, and you will go."

Palmer thought it. The green aura of transferal surrounded him. Moments later he stood

in the massive honeycombed chamber. Gaultor sat on the edge of the dais, resting his arms across his legs. His hands hung over his knees. They were swollen and red, as they had been before, after destroying the fleets that had tried to capture them. Palmer went quickly to the Mhyrnian.

"Let me heal you," he said, but Gaultor shook his head.

"Do you not remember our command? We must not use the Golden Death for any purpose except the removal of Procyx. To do so would mean our own deaths."

Palmer stood in stony silence for a time. At last, shaking his head he reached for Gaultor's hands to heal then.

"No, I say. Thank you, but you must not!"

Palmer stood upright again. "I don't understand how just a simple healing could endanger the mission."

Gaultor hesitated for a moment. The deep singing of the engines was all that could be heard for a time. The Mhyrnian looked up at Palmer, his face furrowed with concern. His sigh was deep and tired. "Nor I. But must we always know the why of something before we decide whether or not to obey it? I do not know, my friend." Gaultor sat still again. Then, looking up once more he asked. "You do remember our final charges, don't you."

Palmer remembered. He nodded yes.

"Dear friend, I will tell you what I know of these things, for while you were being prepared for your part in this mission, I was also healed and taught many things concerning the order of Zorl—things not known beyond that sacred world; things of the ancient days—the Dawn Era.

"Martin, this Vanguard—this sacred vessel—it uses the Golden Death to rule over Procyx. We—the crew—we direct its course—control its energies. Soon, we will empower it to multiply the Golden Death that we, as Most High Noblemen to Zorl, possess within ourselves.

"But that is not all. Once we have begun, this ship will then act much like a . . . a great lens focusing massive quantities of the Golden Death beyond those residing within us. From where? How? I cannot say, for now. But those sources will be there for us to tap. The Creator knows them each and all, and he will provide for us.

"As for us at that hour—we will then become a living catalyst, sparking the amplification of all the Golden Death upward in scope unto a cosmic scale—a scale greater than that of Procyx.

"This I know, Martin! And I know that for this ship to do that, we must provide a set quantity of the Golden Death to serve as that catalyst—that spark, continually, until all is finished. And that spark is immutable in its quantity.

"Once we begin our assault upon the Procyx, the Vanguard Zorl is built to collect the full measure of the Golden Death needed to provide the catalyst. It will be exacted precisely. The spark will be taken from us, even if it kills us. Nothing less can ensure the destruction of the End Star of Grief. These are the ways of Zorl! They are unchanging. The science involved here is as unvaryingly precise as it is unyielding.

"No, Martin. We cannot change this. Were we to provide anything less, the salvation of worlds without end would fall unforgivingly—everlastingly short. That set amount of the Golden Death must and will be taken from us, no matter what the price to ourselves. We will have no choice, then. We must not chance failure! It would be catastrophic! From such a failure as this there can be no reprieve—no other chance. The ruining horrors of the End Star of Grief would spread infinitely, until all that exists would be consumed by it. No. You must not use the Golden Death to heal me. Between us, there might not be enough left afterward—even though we both die in the giving! Not enough! Not enough! There must be enough, Martin!" Gaultor was nearly

frantic, now. "We cannot risk it! No! We dare not! Please! You do understand now, don't you?"

Gaultor stopped, looking deliberately away from Palmer. "It is not, however, too late now. We can turn aside—save our lives for certain. But if we do . . ." he looked up again, his face as full of emotion as it had been back on Mhyrn when he had sung the rites of the dead back in RoseStar. "I know you think only of me. I thank you, kind friend. You are a good and loyal brother; an infidel no longer; a nobleman in truth, as well as in name."

"I will do as you say, Gaultor" Palmer spoke softly. "And I will see this through to the end." The Holy Man seemed to relax a bit, as if some heaviness had passed from him—a heaviness too great to sustain for long.

As Palmer regarded the Mhyrnian now, a strange suspicion began growing within him. Gaultor had been so adamant about using not even the slightest trace of the Golden Death—for any purpose, yet *his* hands were burned—the tools of the Golden Death—the hands, burned as before when the Mhyrnian had destroyed the dark ships . . .

"Gaultor," Palmer spoke evenly—pointedly. "Did you destroy that creature down there with the Golden Death?"

The Mhyrnian smiled. "No, good brother. I did not. Our friend Reeber destroyed him, as you surely saw."

"But I was unconscious . . ."

"It is as I have said. You can rest assured of that."

"Then your hands were burned . . ."

" . . . In the midst of our quest. The demon thing had great power."

Palmer nodded. It all made sense. Still, something didn't quite ring true.

"Now," Gaultor stood. "I need your assistance."

Behind the Mhyrnian, the dais stirred like a pool of lavender quicksilver. Two posts swelled up from it, almost two meters apart, rising upward and blossoming into spheres on their tops—globes not unlike the helm controls Palmer used on the bridge. These solidified. Now, from the posts themselves, rings appeared one on each side and below the spheres. After that, long straps of pluridium cloth poured out of each ring, draping down to the floor.

"Help me up, would you?" Gaultor asked and Palmer stepped forward, raising him to his feet. He walked up the steps and finally stood between the two posts. Here he hesitated for just a moment, then raising his arms, rested his swollen, burned hands upon the pluridium orbs.

"As I thought," Gaultor said after a moment. Palmer saw the great Mhyrnian resting his hands gingerly—tenderly on the spheres. "It won't work this way. Martin, come up beside me."

Palmer obeyed. The blisters on Gaultor's hands were centimeters large and covered much of his palms. It made Palmer wince to see them pressing against the orbs.

"Here is where I need your help, good friend," Gaultor said. There was the slightest tremor in his voice—a voice that sounded raw and exhausted. "You must lash my hands to the spheres."

Palmer's own hands chilled with twisting empathy at the thought of it. All he could answer was a horrified "I don't understand . . ."

"There must be firm and continuous contact between my hands and spheres so that the Golden Death may flow freely between me and the ship. Please, tie them in place."

"But your injuries . . ."

"Do it!" Gaultor's voice was suddenly huge. It almost seemed to echo from the walls of the Vanguard, though they were kilometers away. Palmer spurred into action. He came forward and, taking the ends of the pluridium cloth, began wrapping them across Gaultor's right hand.

"You must pull the cloth tight," Gaultor said with eyes shut tight. "Martin, you must not

fail me in this. Pull my hand tight against the sphere. Pull hard!"

Palmer hesitated, then taking a deep breath, threaded the cloth through the rings on opposite sides and with a powerful tug, cinched Gaultor's right hand to the orb. He did not watch Gaultor's face—did not want to, but finally could not help it. The Mhyrnian's expression was fixed, though barely. His eyes were clamped shut but tears ran down his cheeks and from his nose.

"Again, Martin—you *must* tie me hard with each pass of the cloth."

Palmer obeyed, cinching the fabric again and again. Once in place the strips of pluridium seemed to melt into Gaultor's hands. Palmer repeated the process on the left hand. This time, the Holy Man winced visibly from the pain. As Palmer worked, he saw trickles of fluid from broken blisters seeping out from beneath the palms. It was both clear and bloody, running down the orbs. Palmer wrestled with feelings of horrible dread mingled with a powerful anxiety of rightness.

This task that lay before them both *was*, truly, the end of death for worlds without end. Palmer understood now. The labor would exact more from them both than he had imagined. The realization weighed upon him with such heaviness that he stood in utter amazement of it. He looked up at Gaultor's face. It was stained with tears from clenched eyes and nostrils. Palmer's own eyes and nose stung from the sight. Bending down, he tore a strip from his own uniform. He walked around the front of Gaultor. Gently, he dabbed up the tears from his eyes and cleaned his upper lip of the clear mucous. Gaultor opened his eyes at this. He looked down at Palmer, nearly a head shorter. There was, in the Mhyrnian's gaze, a look of incredulous gratitude at this small act. It was a gratitude mingled with other, deeper emotions that were mixed and stirred. New tears appeared in the Mhyrnian's eyes. The sight blurred in Palmer's eyes. He sniffed, clearing his vision with the heels of his hands. Once more, Palmer cleared the moisture from Gaultor's face.

"The time draws dangerously short," the Vanguard spoke quietly into Palmer's mind. "We must go."

"There is one last thing," Gaultor spoke quietly. "Martin—inside my cloak you will find a single tablet of pluridium, folded and sealed. Take it."

Palmer reached carefully inside. Finding it, he took it out. It was as the Mhyrnian had described it: a rectangle of pluridium, perhaps five centimeters by eight, doubled over and closed like a book. It was wrapped with a cloth ribbon.

"Yes, that is it. It is a final prophecy that you are to pass on to your posterity on the new worlds they will settle. Yes, I know of your future from our days at Serenity—you remember?"

"I remember." Palmer said, examining the binding absently. "But why give it to me now? Why not later, when things are done and we can talk about it without hurry?"

"I have been commanded to give it to you at this time. Please do not question the wisdom of that command."

Palmer studied his friend's face for a moment. "I won't, good brother."

"Place it within your uniform—please—now."

Palmer obeyed. He had learned, at last, to obey without having to know all the reasons. Gaultor watched him and then spoke. "This is not to be opened until the days of your old age—the days of your own death. Then, it is to be spread across your worlds, as widely as there are people. No ear should not hear it. Do you understand me?"

Palmer nodded. "Yes, but I don't read Mhyrnese."

"It is written in Interworld."

"Oh. All right. I will do as you say."

Gaultor took a deep breath, his face tightening into resolve. "Now is the time."

A sound from behind turned Palmer to see a third pedestal rising from the edge of the dais. It rose perhaps a meter, then stopped. A spherical depression appeared in its top. It looked like a cradle for something, perhaps a third of a meter in diameter.

"The place of the lost treasure," the Vanguard answered Palmer's questioning thought. "When the treasure is reclaimed it will reside here to finish the work of the Great Plan in the Days of the End Star of Joy. For now, it waits. *We* can delay no longer. You must return to the bridge. I will bring you."

Palmer turned as the green radiance swelled about him.

"What I do I have done willingly," Gaultor said. The Mhyrnian's face disappeared in the brilliance, an expression of . . . of *sorrow* on it? Sorrow? What was going on?

Palmer climbed aboard the helm. He placed his hands on the guidance orbs. As he did, a clear, wincing recollection of Gaultor's wounds pricked him. Palmer's uniform blossomed in a rich, amber-gold light. Looking around him, he found Procyx. He turned the great starship toward it.

The End Star blazed in its terrible robes of vibrant, blue glory. All about it glowered its dazzling children—alien stars of disquieting beauty; coherent brilliances of every hue and color imaginable. Palmer opened his Seership upon the scene.

There was something else there now—something Palmer had *not* seen before. Enclosing Procyx was a veil of massive black holes and their accompanying accretion nebulae. His heart fell. More ruin? More to overcome?

"No," the Vanguard answered his thought. "Salvation. Go on to Procyx."

Gripping the guidance spheres, Palmer accelerated the ship away from Mhyrn. It dwindled to a speck in less than a moment, this world of legends, this home of the Vanguard Zorl; this most ancient cradle of humanity. It sparkled with sun-searing brilliance, blinding in its golden shield wielded at the hands of the boy that stood above the world in piercing, white glory.

The Vanguard rushed into the void. The alien stars flashed past like a blizzard of rainbow sparks. Palmer saw strange energies within them building toward explosive release. Whatever these stars were, they now stood at the threshold of some exponential event—an event that could not be reversed.

How did Palmer know this? But as he thought it, he suddenly knew the answer. He and the Vanguard were one. Palmer had unified with the Zorl on the instinctive level, as he had learned to do on the Vanguard Gabriel. The Zorl knew much about the End Star; its characteristics and laws of behavior. These bizarre stars through which the Vanguard passed were *seeds* of the Procyx. They were fast nearing the time when they would explode outward into every corner of the cosmos, spreading the doom of Hypermotility into galaxy after galaxy, no matter how remote.

"Seeds?" Palmer thought. "Is Procyx alive?"

"There is nothing that is not," the Vanguard answered. "In its own way."

The Zorl approached the envelope of the black holes. Here, Palmer slowed, guiding the great starship toward a place of minimal turbulences. Briefly, his encounter at the harbor black holes, now galaxies away, returned to him. He studied the gravity tides that lay before him—its ebbings, turbulences and eddies. As he did, he suddenly comprehended something about them. It was all only vaguely rational. It was more emotional. He saw things beyond sight. All at once he felt and understood the black holes beyond their rational ramifications on time and space.

These black holes were different from the dark harbor stars. As he looked deeper, Palmer found within these collapsars intense, searing power. Impossible energies raged beyond the dark event horizons. They were a myriad of energies and forces; times, glories and wonders. And the flux of these dazzling powers began evolving and shifting. Swirls of golden brilliances began to spread outward from the centers of the drifting vortices that churned beneath the event horizons of each black hole. They were wandering filamentary golden energies that were both lightning and flame all at once . . .

"The Golden Death?" he asked out loud. But he knew the answer. These black holes were stars of purpose and design. They were no mere accidents. These collapsars had been constructed from the sub-atomic level up. They had been *built* to perform specific functions. They were tools of a massive size. And there were millions of them here. They clustered in swarms . . . was it in direct opposition to the alien star swarms of Procyx?

"It is even so," the Zorl answered him. A new flood of encouragement washed through Palmer. Here was the power of the Golden Death on a cosmic scale—a scale equal to that of the Procyx. All that was needed was a focusing agent; an amplifier—the Vanguard Zorl.

The Zorl passed easily through the turbulences—or did it just seem an easy passage compared to the ordeal of the harbor black holes?

Tiny, blinking crosshairs appeared on the great dome over Palmer's head. His wondering at it alone seemed triggered an answer from the Zorl. Beneath the flashing symbol, lettering appeared:

Nebo shuttle. Bellatrix class. Unit number: two (The Book). Guidance: Zorl sphere. Occupants: Clement Reeber (FED); Melana Thorl (FED); Celeste Jenson (FED-ENCY); Kishkor-tun-Metrasor (MHYRN/FED); Oreb-tun-Metrasor (MHYRN/FED). Mission: Transport and maintain control of black hole resource (EYE OF POLYPHEMUS) until arrival of Zorl, Vanguard 001110.

A crystalline note sounded and new lettering appeared.

Stand by to receive control of black hole resource: 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .

"What's . . ."

"We will control the black holes and receive their energies," the Zorl replied. "Gaultor will focus them."

"Does he know?"

"He knows. Still, it would do well to lock your course now. Move us forward to the position I will show you. There, inside your mind."

Palmer saw. The guidance framework was both a sensual as well as a visual sensation. The great starship twisted and shot forward instantly, as if inertia did not exist. Palmer moved the Zorl there without conscious thought beyond understanding what the Vanguard had shown him.

5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . .

Procyx seemed almost speared by the needle-sharp tip of the Zorl. It was yet light years distant, but it seemed close enough to touch. It spouted fantastic prominences that reached far into space. They looked like tentacles of searing, blue light that left intricately webbed after images as they wandered. The prominences split, sometimes merging to form new appendages while sparkles of color flickered across the living lightning. It was as if they probed and grasped at unknown dimensions. Palmer deepened his seeing and found vibrant life. The living Procyx was both enthralling and repugnant; beautiful and terrifying at the same instant. A living thing! And what was Hypermotility, really? Feeding? Procyx feeding to create children from the rubble

of stars and worlds?

"Martin," The Zorl interrupted his thoughts. "Prepare for a jolt. Hold this position from now on."

3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . Transfer.

The Vanguard shuddered. Palmer felt the mass of the Zorl had multiplying itself over and over. The huge structures below and surrounding him on bridge flared to white brilliance. They pulsed energies from elsewhere in the Vanguard up into the helm. Through his Seership, Palmer could see invisible webbings that sprayed outward from the hull. Each one touched a black hole and then vibrated that touch back to him. His whole frame tingled. Beneath his hands, he saw the first report of the Golden Death. It arced and burned between palm and control sphere. It felt warm and buzzing. There was no pain—not yet. He felt sure *that* would come later. No one had said it. It had been inferred in Methuselah's final instructions as well as on the training flight he had had on the Gabriel, between the harbor black holes. There would surely be difficulty; struggle; pain. Yes, it *would* come.

He held the Zorl in absolute, unflinching position. Simultaneously, Palmer heard a distant, muffled cry from far behind him. He dared not avert his eyes from the Procyx—from the environment the Zorl had created for him as a navigational guide. But part of the seer in him looked back and saw the Holy Man contorted, his back arching in what must have been intense pain. Churning flames too richly golden to be merely fire surrounded Gaultor. The surrounding honeycombed hexagonal patterns that stretched away for kilometers in all directions had begun swelling toward Gaultor. They were pedestals of pure, clear crystal. Each was filled with blinding, churning lightning.

The wounds on Gaultor's hands must be searing with pain. Palmer fought a momentary urge to help him somehow. But the memory of Methuselah's charge to them held him at his post.

The Nebo lifted out and away from its old position, flying through and then far outside the shell of black holes, taking up a new position well beyond them.

The Vanguard began to sing in a powerful synthesis of vocal and crystalline ringing. Splashes of golden light began coursing across the walls and ceilings of the huge chamber where Gaultor stood enshrouded in fire. The ringings grew in intensity, singing every note in the audible spectrum, and then beginning a powerful harmonic surge inward, growing closer and closer toward musical singularity. A massive bubble of golden lightning began swirling around Gaultor. The musical ringings drew closer and closer, reaching at last complete concord—a single, brilliant note. The bubble of lightning exploded outward from Gaultor. It shuddered across the walls and ceilings of the great chamber, then beyond, coursing along the sleek fuselage of the Vanguard. Webbings and filaments of blinding, golden lightning began bouncing back and fourth along the full length of the ship. Back and forth they rushed, faster and faster until in a burst of dazzling brilliance, a beam of searing, golden radiance detonated from the tip of the Vanguard, cleaving the darkness and piercing Procyx at dead center.

Procyx's wandering lacings of blue coherence stopped suddenly—hanging immobile—shimmering with pulsing flashes. They began to wear thin, fleecing apart in trickling twinklings. Palmer could almost hear screeching gratings at their disintegration. Finally, they collapsed in upon the End Star, disappearing in explosive splashes on its roiling surface of laser-blue brilliance.

The Zorl was now surrounded in shimmering, living shells of Golden Death—two deep; three; now four, each spinning patterns of filamentary light in its own, unique, whirling glory. The beam of death and salvation continued to cut into Procyx with iron-sure steadiness. Minutes

passed. New shells of the Golden Death continued to coalesce about the Zorl, ever larger—ever more powerful, and each of its own unique mixture of dancing fires and leaping, wandering lightnings.

Palmer's hands burned as if he held them above a flame, or perhaps within churning, hot water—steaming water. He clenched the globes of guidance hard, ignoring the steady fires and sparks of gold that flared and flashed beneath them. Instead, he turned as much of his attention as he dared upon Gaultor.

The great chamber was alive with new, hexagonal crystals pushing slowly outward from floor, walls and ceiling. They reminded Palmer briefly of shunting rods used in the simplest of fission, nuclear reactors—when all were pushed in, the release of energy was slight—quiet. But as each rod was withdrawn, the powers grew and intensified.

At the center of the massive hall, Gaultor stood shivering within the raging glories of the Golden Death. Shivering? Palmer looked more carefully. The Mhyrnian was shuddering. From . . . from pain? There was a look of anguish, barely contained on the face of the Holy Man. His eyes were shut, grimaced. His brows were drawn together—his mouth clenched. Gaultor's hands were utterly lost in a blinding radiance. Palmer opened his Seership more and more, trying to see more deeply. There seemed to be no tissue upon Gaultor's hands any longer. The muscles were gone; tendons, arteries, nerves—all the tissues evaporated into the wandering wisps of smoke that rose from the still-clenching skeletal remains that themselves glowed with their own piercing light. Gaultor's forearms burned as if under pressure, but were not consumed—only, perhaps, slowly in the wandering vapors that seemed more like super-hot plasma than smoke. For the first time, Palmer grew suddenly, seriously worried about Gaultor. The ordeal Palmer was enduring within his portion the Golden Death was hot—painful, now; even searing. But it was nothing like that. Weren't they supposed to be sharing equally in this?

"Martin!" The Zorl shouted at Palmer. He pulled his attention back to Procyx just quickly enough to see the massive, terrible barrage of gravitons pouring out from the End Star in a shockwave of terrifying intensity. He braced himself—braced the ship as the awful wave crashed against the scintillating shells of Golden Death that surrounded the Vanguard fifteen deep. Palmer watched in growing fear as shell after shell of energy was first breached, then crushed by the gravity stormings of the Procyx. He found himself breathing harder and faster, concentrating on holding the ship steady.

Palmer's hands burst into flames. He cried out in pain—searing, hot agony. He wrenched his mind away from the agony, trying to concentrate on holding his position. His hands raged with pain. He couldn't do it! The trauma—it was like falling from a height and hitting the earth.

Time seemed to compress and stretch out all at once. But here, the effect was static.

As if from a distance, Palmer felt his grip on the globes faltering. He clenched his hands tighter. The Golden Death swirled up as if angry, potent and defiant against the barrage of Procyx's retaliation. It engulfed Palmer now—fire and lightning. It was like Gaultor back on Mhyrn when he had destroyed the fleets of the outlaw combines. It went on and on.

Palmer was both acutely and vaguely aware of the damage the Zorl was sustaining. He could see the pluridium, glowing under its super golden energies, begin to bend and flex on the atomic level. The surface of the starship began first to crystallize and then crack under the immense pressures. He watched and fought, his hands raging in searing pain beneath golden furies, feeling both incredibly focused and simultaneously helpless to act further as events carried him along. The sensation of falling . . . turning and burning like a meteor against a heavy darkness—falling and burning; yellow hot; white hot; blue hot . . .

The tsunami of gravitons crashed and crashed, relentless. There was no escape. Within him, Palmer knew the Zorl was on the verge of collapsing. He prayed for help—pulled up dregs of the Golden Death from ever deeper within him. For a fleeting moment, he felt and saw things with his natural eyes. Everywhere about him was an inferno. Its fires roared as in a blast furnace and lightning struck through the flames to every point of his body. He began to cry out in despair. It was not enough—all this. He could not survive! *They* could not survive. He dared not look back at Gaultor—could not even risk the thought. Darkness suddenly flashed in through the storm of Golden Death that surrounded him. Its impact flattened him—took away his breath. His eyes stung at it, his head reeling. This was it. Despite everything, there would be only failure, now. He cried in despair for it; for the dead of countless worlds; for Arleen . . .

A massive wave of gravitons exploded outward from Procyx toward the Zorl. It was many times more massive than any that had hit them before.

Death.

Failure.

Ruin.

Procyx had won. Palmer cried out in a final rage of defiance, lifting the powers of the Golden Death within him to their uttermost levels.

It was then that he saw them—brilliant points of light, each many times more brilliant than Procyx or its seed, moving toward him against the cloudy slash of light that was the galaxy. Each had its own color—brilliant and potent, looking like an exploding star of spectral glory. There were twelve of them, closing fast on the Zorl. He watched, detached as the lights spread out quickly, each taking position in a circular array about the bubble of black holes and accretion storms that surrounded Procyx and the Zorl and then, in one accord, the blinding *stars* crossed over.

Palmer discerned them within the dizzying suspension of his mind. Vanguards! His heart took a sudden leap of hope. His mind cleared just enough from its endless fall to see that the assailed Zorl had nearly drifted off its course. The beam of the Golden Death nearly missed Procyx. Panic burned through Palmer, but it was like a cleansing wave. He opened the incredible engines of the Zorl into full power. He heard them roar and sing beneath and behind him; saw the great vessel turn beneath its immeasurable attack and lock again upon the very center of the End Star.

The last shell of the Zorl wafted away in glowing, Procyx-blue plasma beneath the massive onslaught of the gravitons. But the ship held together! Somehow, the raging, shuddering, burning starship survived.

"Attention Zorl," a voice spoke inside Palmer's head. It was not the Vanguard. "This is Commodore Morse commanding the Vanguard Cygnus. Are you reading us?"

"Yes, yes," was all Palmer could manage. His voice spoke flames—his eyes sparked with golden lightnings. He pulled himself together enough to answer.

"We arrived in time! Thank God! Prepare to receive our combined discharges."

"Affirm. We are near destruction."

"Understand. Each Vanguard is preparing redirect and focus energies from the Eye of Polyphemus, the black hole arrays surrounding Procyx. These will then be amplified and focused on you."

"Thank you. Please hurry."

"We're nearly ready . . ."

Palmer took a deep breath. He caught a glimpse of Gaultor, kilometers behind him

within the massive chamber of the Golden Death. His arms were gone. His legs were a raging blast furnace and glowing smoke poured into the air all around him. Perhaps a hundred of the hexagonal damping rods stood fully extended, each shining like a rod of borrowed sunlight. "Hurry! I am . . . " Palmer hesitated, then chose other words. "We are nearly gone!"

From all around him, Palmer saw the swirling maelstroms of golden energy that poured from the black holes begin to lift from their contact with the Zorl and gather among the twelve. Each starship seemed a huge hurricane of light. Rapid flashes of white danced among them—stroboscopic brilliances that fired in ever more frequent bursts—faster and faster until they soon became a steady drone of light. Everywhere Palmer looked, sun-bright radiances of the Golden Death gathered about the newly arrived Vanguards. Their own brilliance was soon lost in the overwhelming glory of gold. Their swirling turbulences began coalescing into twelve awesome super-storms of Golden Death.

"Hurry," Palmer whispered. His arms were now like Gaultor's—lost in flames and pains beyond anything he had ever imagined a man could endure and remain conscious. The Vanguards reappeared for a fleeting moment, shining in golden powers like the Zorl itself. Moments later, each starship fired upon the Zorl in complete unison.

The beams that leapt across space toward Palmer and Gaultor were each a hundred times more brilliant than that which the Zorl alone had been firing at Procyx. At the exact moment they struck the Zorl, Palmer saw and felt the Golden Death spread to fill every particle of his being. He looked down inside him, beyond the molecular level; beyond the atomic level; beyond the quarkian level; on and on. There was no end to the structures within—smaller and smaller, ever more complex; universes within universes; kingdoms within kingdoms, and the Golden Death spread in and in and in . . .

The ship roared like the center of an exploding sun. The penetration of the Golden Death filled every particle of the Zorl as it had filled Palmer, soaking it up like a hungry sponge.

And now there was a terrible cry. For a moment, Palmer thought he had made it. But no. It was small—distant, racked with excruciating agony—and death. Palmer's back chilled at it. He knew who had screamed. Gaultor. Looking back, he saw the Holy Man, nothing now but a shape of incredible brilliance. All about him, the damping rods slid out in a rapid-fire domino effect one after another after another—chain reaction. The flames that surrounded the filamentary shape of Gaultor stormed with such violence that the very dais upon which he stood was shining blue hot—melting beneath the heat. The orbs of power to which his hands had been lashed were lost from sight.

And now, Palmer knew what he had suspected. It *was* death. Death! Only oblivion lay ahead for them. Racked with intolerable pain—his own body, he was sure, evaporating beneath the terrible energies of the Golden Death—he fought on, holding the Zorl steady. He steeled himself, venturing one last look toward his dear friend and then . . . then he saw it.

A brilliance of staggering magnificence hovered before Gaultor. It was white to exceed any whiteness Palmer had ever seen; pure, brilliant—shining far brighter than the dazzling radiances of the super firestorm of the Golden Death that engulfed Gaultor. Palmer squinted against it.

"What . . ." he began, then paused. Something moved within the blinding aura—a shape; a figure! Was there someone in there with Gaultor? Palmer probed deeper—straining to see more. Yes—yes! Within the blinding radiance Palmer could barely discern the form of a man standing before Gaultor—a being as of the glory of the sun faced the Mhyrnian.

Palmer shook his head, amazed. How? Who? And suddenly, he began to see things; he felt

things that were both new and simultaneously well-known echoes of lost, forgotten majesties that lay just beyond the edge of recollection. Palmer caught flashes of understanding of things barely imagined and yet fundamentally familiar. The man of glory—Palmer almost knew him. His hands! Look at his hands!

Palmer found them in the searing light. They wore cruel injuries—wounds unhealed—painful to look upon—like Gaultor's. The wounds were far more terrible than they had first appeared—terrible! But as Palmer both winced and wondered at them, sudden significance burst upon him. There was something else to them—something more. Yes! As Gaultor's burned hands had been as badges of his power, so these injured hands spoke of inherent power, immeasurable. At the thought, the glory of these hands flared with incredible magnificence. The very power of all life was there those hands!

The great being of glory turned blazing eyes upon Palmer. A sudden wave of joy unspeakable burst upon him at the brush of that gaze. Palmer felt the terrors and agonies of the Golden Death fade away. He could not catch his breath at the intensity of the joy that softly coursed through him. It was a joy he knew well, the joy of the City of Unity, only many times magnified. It threatened to pull Palmer into it, as the majesty of the great city had.

Now, amid the Vanguard's singings and rumblings, Palmer heard a muddled word uttered from an agonized Gaultor—a crying out of utter despair. The being of light turned back to enfold Gaultor within his glorious gaze. In that moment the face of the Mhyrnian, looking up, saw the blinding, white radiance. The burning, wispy shell of a man that was all that remained of Gaultor the Mhyrnian looked upward and finally upon the face of this magnificent one. First there was confusion, then wonder, and finally a brightening recognition.

The radiant being poured forth his limitless, immeasurable love to fill the great chamber that burned and shone so thoroughly from Golden Death. Gaultor heaved a final, victorious sigh, and the One of glory gently placed his own marred hands atop those of Gaultor.

The Vanguard Zorl shuddered with time-distorted violence. Every atom of the ship burst into incomprehensible brilliances that cycled through every color of the rainbow over and over, faster and faster. It was then that Palmer saw the nautilus shell of stasis protection closing about him.

"No!" he screamed.

"Hold your course," the Zorl spoke to him in a voice as equally distorted by pain as Gaultor's had been.

"Gaultor, no!"

"Farewell, Martin," the Zorl said.

I V

Morse watched through the nautilus shell of protection that surrounded him and every member of the Cygnus' crew. As a seer in his own right, he saw all the energies of the Eye of Polyphemus pouring—raging into the Vanguard Zorl with blinding vividness, only to blast forth into Procyx with final, irresistible force. The Lost Master Vanguard shone with that light—a glory that was more brilliant even than that of a thousand exploding stars.

"Hold your position," the soft voice of the Cygnus spoke within him. Seated at the helm, Morse held the Vanguard and watched.

The Zorl suddenly burst outward in a violent explosion—shards of light that plunged into the void toward the shell of the Eye of Polyphemus accelerating faster and faster as it expanded.

Procyx was gone in its own golden death—an implosion that rivaled for a few fleeting seconds the detonation of the Vanguard Zorl.

Morse watched as the dazzling, spiraling shards of golden debris plunged outward through the shell of the Eye of Polyphemus and beyond—a great shockwave of light, expanding farther and farther. Morse gazed on intently. Now the shards of Zorl ripped through the space of the alien, seedling stars of Procyx. Each gave up its bizarre energies in blasts of staggering beauty and brilliance tens; hundreds; thousands gone in minutes. Soon, all were consumed, and the shards of light themselves dimmed and flickered, finally spinning off in spectral flashes and wisps into darkness and were gone.

The stasis shell about Morse unwound, finally disappearing as the Cygnus began cooling, its energies and falling back toward normalcy.

The bridge was silent. Everyone stood or sat alone, quiet, looking about them into space reprieved. Procyx was gone. In its place there drifted a massive cloud of interstellar debris. It sparkled and flickered. Morse studied it with his Seership. It was made of hydrogen—all hydrogen—young hydrogen; young as the birth of a new cosmos. He looked around at where all the seedling stars had been. There, too, he found great clouds of newborn, vibrant hydrogen—the foundation of all matter in the universe. He took a deep breath, wiping the tears that swelled fully in his eyes now.

"Commodore," Melrose tranzed him.

"Yes, what is it?"

"We have detected a nautilus stasis in the vicinity of the destroyed Lost Master.

"One, you say? Only one?"

"Yes sir. Only one."

Morse sighed. "Very well. I'll bring us aside. Prepare to retrieve it.

Epilogue
Days of Fullness

I

"We have entered the cities," Melrose tranzed Morse. Silently, the commander of the Vanguard Cygnus lifted his head. The Treasure of the Cygnus shone a brilliant crimson radiance within the dimensionally endless, central chamber of the great vessel. All about the Treasure, in any direction could be seen an infinite array of deep heavens, each spanning an infinity of its own glory and wonder. Morse let his gaze rest upon the Treasure once more before leaving. It, itself, was as an eternal sprawl of ever changing, never repeating brilliance of intense spectral reds and red-oranges; red violets and searing purples. Each danced and permutated in fractal magnificence, dancing about its hovering dodecahedron nucleus which turned slowly above the pluridium pylon.

Morse's anxieties would not be stilled, even here. The loss of the Vanguard Zorl—one of the more powerful Master Vanguards—had been a shock to him—he that had always known of the virtual invincibility of the Vanguards. None had ever been lost—never! Not until now. It was not only a sobering thought but a disquieting fear that now hung over everyone on board the Cygnus. And it was not limited to this ship. In his last conference with the fleet commanders, Morse had learned that it was prevalent on all the Vanguards. In some cases it was frighteningly close to undermining the very operation of duties—even commonplace tasks. And this same disquiet was powerful in Morse. He had come here—to the Treasure—for solace; encouragement; something!

"Commodore?"

"Yes, Melrose. I'm coming." Morse stood, unchanged—fearful, grieving and unsure of himself. Perhaps only the passage of time, or perhaps even a new generation of crew, would be required to restore confidence again. Morse took a deep breath, stirring duty up inside him and transferred himself to the bridge.

The ghost cities of Hypermotility drifted about and above the Cygnus in a dark, occasionally glinting swarms of eerie splendor. Morse saw how they caught and held the gaze of the bridge crew as he emerged from the green radiance of transferal. Some meters away, he saw Melrose and Sentegor, the Mhyrnian boy prophet, standing next to the Lady Portia. Flanking them were two other Mhyrnians. Morse immediately recognized Merrimoor, the former High Chief of Mhyrn and ambassador to Polyphemus. The other Mhyrnian was a young woman. All three wore robes of power. Sentegor's clothing shimmered in rainbow hues that wandered across otherwise silver-white attire. The young woman wore a gown of twinkling silver illuminations while Merrimoor was dressed in iridescent greens. Morse went to them.

"It is that one there," Sentegor said pointing to a distant crag of devastated planetary crust, wandering in the dim light of galactic rim stars. In his mind, Morse watched Melrose tranz the proposed course to the helmsman atop the central double helix tower. Immediately, the Vanguard arced about in slow majesty, then pushed upward toward it among the swarming, cities of planetary debris.

"Commodore, this is the tribunal of Most High Noble Ones," Melrose said, as Morse

arrived at the small group. "Sentegor, Most High Nobleman to the Great God, you know." Morse nodded. "I believe you also know Merrimoor, formerly High Chief among the Seven Chiefs of Mhyrn. He is now a Most High Nobleman to Zorl."

Morse bowed. "Pardon me, but I thought the robes of Zorl were red."

"Until the fullness of the days of grief, they were. Now that those days are past and the End Star of Joy lies before us, all the followers of Zorl attire themselves in the color of life and hope. So it shall be until the coming of the new and final End Star."

Morse nodded again.

"This is Velrena, most high Noble Lady to Procyon and a member of the order of Kyrel."

"I offer you all my personal welcome here," Morse said.

"Thank you. Isn't it marvelous, Commodore? The priesthoods of all the Masters again live among my people," Sentegor said.

"It *is* wonderful," Morse agreed.

"The task we are working on now is in preparation for the days of the Warriors of Light," the Lady Portia said, perhaps more for the benefit of the Mhyrnians. She had come to the Cygnus by shuttle only a day earlier with a charge to gather the Mhyrnian tribunal and perform the task that now stood before them.

"Yes. This is the place," Sentegor said.

"Any record as to the name of this city?" Morse tranzed the Cygnus.

"Yes." The Vanguard spoke softly within Morse's mind. "It is the remains of Tolereth.

"Please take us over the city," Sentegor said.

The Vanguard began a slow passage beneath the gigantic, ruined city, looming overhead—hanging upside down above them. It was massive, continent-sized. Huge, intact structures passed above them for long minutes. Sentegor stood in complete silence, watching.

"There," he said finally. "That parkway. They shall come down there." He turned, looking about him urgently. "And . . . and, yes! Over there. Turn us, please. Yes. There. See it? That structure. They will be driven inside there." Sentegor hesitated for a moment, staring at it. "No," he corrected himself. "Only one will be driven in there. The other is . . ." he shook his head, scowling—as if trying to see something better. "The other is taken.

"In that building . . . there should be a vessel inside."

"Expeditionary team ready to transfer," a voice tranzed within Morse's head.

"Proceed," he tranzed back. "Give us visual the moment you arrive."

The air before them bristled briefly with scratches of green light that darkened and spread to reveal a scene: the interior of a large hanger. Men and women moved about the cold, dim vacuum in envirosuits. Portastrobes shone about the darkness in stark, rose swathes of light. A single VALLIANT class Federation fighter stood poised for launch. Morse watched the team members move quickly toward the sleeping ship. After a few minutes, one them tranzed a message to Morse.

"It looks like it's stuck—emergency releases frozen. Looks like it never had a chance to get away. What do you want us to do, Commodore?"

Morse relayed the request to the group.

"Have them restore the fighter to emergency launch capabilities," the Lady Portia replied. Morse nodded and passed the order along. "When that is done, have them install the special Mestrate power cells I brought with me. We must ensure that there will be no failure to launch, due to mechanical problems or lack of power. Understand? Those are Polyphemus' exact words. We do not know when the Warriors of Light will arrive, so the fighter must be ready and

operational at a moment's notice centuries—even millions of years from now."

The work was done. The Lady Portia watched it carefully—asked questions and gave directions until she was completely satisfied. Hours later, the expeditionary team transferred back aboard the Vanguard. Morse had a contourmorph brought for the Lady Portia. Tired, she almost slumped in it. Her breaths came shallow and fast—her face scowling from what seemed to Morse to be dizziness.

"You all right?" he asked her after a time.

She nodded, deliberately taking deep, renewing breaths. "I'm just tired. I've been working many hours a day before I came here. I'm not complaining—do not misunderstand." She smiled wryly. "I'm just not as young as I used to be."

"What has been keeping you so occupied?"

"Polyphemus has begun a new project."

"Ah, yes, I've heard rumors . . ."

"Rumors," she laughed. "Where would humanity be without them? Well, my good sir—I will tell you what is really going on."

"Polyphemus is beginning construction on several thousand immense structures to be built *within* the confines of Polyphemus itself—in the space between the interior stars. We're currently in the process of moving several hundred red giants inside Polyphemus for the purpose of making shaped fusion reactors out of them. But these structures; they're massive things—easily on the scale of Polyphemus itself. I have been overseeing the human labor end of the project."

"Structures? What do you mean?"

"Curious things. I have seen the plans for them—overall plans, anyway. So far, they seem nothing but immense . . . I don't know, exactly—immense shells, light years across. Someday they will be filled with compartments of many different sizes—hundreds of trillions in each—thousands of trillions—more. The plan for each compartment shows multiple sections that look like some sort of technological apparatus is to be fitted there. I don't see or understand any sense to it. The entire project could take thousands millennia to complete. When I approached Polyphemus with this timetable, he accepted it without comment. He won't tell me what they are for—says I don't really need to worry about that for now."

Morse shook his head.

"Commodore," Sentegor spoke quietly, gazing at the dead city Tolereth. "The path—the, oh, what do you call it? What's the word in Interworld? Trajectory! Yes! The trajectory of the city is not exactly right. Can you change it at all?"

Morse tranzed engineering for the creation of the same graviton laser effect that had earlier been fashioned in the failed attempt to destroy Procyx under Hastings' plan. The entire vessel could pump out incredible quantities of gravity—plus or minus—in a beam that could easily move whole planets about. Here—now, they had no fear of any backlash such as a living Procyx had given them. Here was only a fragment of the dead shell of a world—an interstellar fossil. Now a globe of pluridium was brought forward. Morse handed it to the boy prophet.

"Hold this and look at Tolereth. Think what the trajectory should be and the Vanguard will affect the change for you."

Sentegor took the globe, gripping it in his hands. For long moments, he gazed upward at the great ruined city. His robes sparkled with intense flashes of rainbow light and his hands momentarily disappeared within a throbbing pulse of spectral fires and lightnings, not far removed from the dazzling glories of the Golden Death. Then, briefly, the Vanguard Cygnus shuddered once. Above them, the Ghost City of Tolereth began a slow veering to starboard.

"It is done. Now, it will drift toward its fateful rendezvous with my world."

"That's light years away," Morse said. "It could take millions of years to reach Mhyrn—millions at least. Probably more."

"It is headed correctly now." He turned to the Lady Portia. "All is prepared, as you have desired. You may return and report."

"I thank you," she smiled, shaking his hand.

"We but serve the same ends, noble Lady. We each do so in our own unique ways, but we serve together, and with power. It is, now, as it was long ago. We are one—all of us, and against such unity nothing evil can ever prevail."

Morse excused himself quickly. He transferred back to the Treasure chamber like a fleeing child.

Lies! Not vicious lies, just the lies of life discovered by the naive through the trials of pain and death and disappointment. He gazed upon the Treasure of Glory. Another lie! A pretty light—nothing more!

No solace, here—not anywhere on the Vanguard! Not anywhere in the universe! The Cygnus was not invincible! None of the Vanguards were. They were just glorified space ships with lots of flash and glitter to scare off the ignorant or the gullible! Fancy space ships, that was all, for the Zorl—one of the great Masters had exploded! Why go on with the charade? Morse bent before the Treasure, agonized.

"Why?" he voiced a quiet pleading. "Are you *not* all-powerful? Is not that which is all righteous all powerful by its very nature?"

There was no answer. The Treasure only sung its crystalline song and spun its webbings of red and orange and purple brilliances.

For a time, Morse waded terribly alone through his heavy oppressions. He could see nothing as a seer; he could not feel even a fraction of the incredible sense of peace that had sustained him here through so many crises. Fakery! Self-pumped, over-inflated egomania—megalomania!

All *could* fail, couldn't it! All this could be in vain!

The darkness deepened around him.

"Dearest God, help me," Morse whispered after a time, lowering himself to the floor, eyes clenched shut in fervent longing. "I cannot . . ." Thunder roiled from some unknown distance, stopping his words. He lifted his eyes.

"You labor beneath a misunderstanding," the Cygnus interrupted quietly beneath the echoing rumbles. "We have seen this sorrow and pain you bear much aboard the crews of all the Vanguards—this fear—this despairing. I have counseled with my sisters and brothers on the matter and we have been given permission to tell you this: you sorrow because you assume that the Vanguard Zorl disintegrated in failure beneath a power too great for it to bear."

"But this we answer in truth. Tell it to *all* that grieve. Let your minds be at peace. The Zorl performed as it was designed to function in its destruction of the End Star of Grief. Even now, it gathers itself across light-years of space toward that day when it shall return to full service. You see it is master over the End Star, and ahead yet lies the End Star of Joy."

"Now come, our brother."

Morse straightened the terrible weight of loss and fear and guilt lifting from him.

"We have work to do within the hydrogen clouds that remained after the destruction of Procyx."

Morse turned to the Treasure of Glory, blazing and in its crimson majesty. In its

incandescent, scarlet brilliance, worlds without end burst open before his eyes. Once more purpose flowed back into him like a flood of rich, sweet light. He transferred with excitement to the bridge. He must tell the others!

I I

Celeste Jenson waved goodbye to her friends wearing a mask of genuine pleasure. Their glider car pulled away from her balcony and rose upward into the partially overcast skies of rich star clusters that filled the heavens of the Encyclopedia worlds. The moment they were far from view her expression fell mercifully into its true emotional shadings. She took a deep breath. At last she could be herself. She walked into her flat and dropped her wrap onto the floor. The lights came on as she moved through the rooms toward her bed.

"Some Nectaris, please," she said to the walls. Normally, this was her time to shower, but she was too tired tonight. The play had been light enough—a comedy. Celeste shook her head. "A comedy!" Didn't they understand? She shook her head, knowing the answer. They meant well. She could not fault them for intent, but a comedy was the last thing she wanted tonight.

She changed into her nightgown, absently hanging her clothes. How it hurt inside. She struggled against the tears that fought to overwhelm her all too often now. But then today was special. Today, anyone would allow her some grieving. It had been ten years ago today that she had lost her son, and tomorrow would be no better. Tomorrow would be the tenth anniversary of her husband's murder at the hands of a terrorist. She turned the sheets to her bed down and walked back into the kitchen. The warm, steaming cup of Nectaris waited for her in the dispenser. She paused, looking at it. For a moment, she didn't know if she really wanted it after all. She had lost thirty pounds over the last decade. Her friends were worried about her. Go to counseling, they had told her. At least go to a Mestrate healer. No. She must face this thing on her own. Overcome it. Beat it!

She took the Nectaris and walked into the living room. She noticed her wrap. She'd pick it up before bed—before the bott attendants came out to clean silently while she slept. She would not give up—not yet. Laughing humorlessly, she bent over, picked up her wrap, and took it to the closet.

As she passed the long, marble table that ran the back of her contourmorph sofa she saw it. A book, resting under the floating glow lamp, and on top of the book, there was an envelope.

For a moment, fear struck at her. She turned around, looking for an intruder. "Security!" she said in a hoarse, half whisper.

"Yes, Lady Jenson?" her apartment's automated scrutiny system replied. "Are you unwell?"

"Well, no—I mean look at this book! Where did it come from?"

There was a silent pause. "Didn't you bring it in with you?"

"Am I alone?!" she chided the walls.

"Of course."

Now Celeste began to doubt herself. *Had* she brought it in earlier?

"You're sure everything is secure?"

"All is well."

"Show me your log," she said, putting the cup down on the table next to the book. She now saw that the envelope had her name on it. She squinted at the handwriting. It was not one she

recognized but the moment she scrutinized using her Mestrate skills her fears were immediately allayed. There was absolute friendship and caring behind the hand that wrote it. "Never mind," she said to the walls.

"As you wish," it replied and fell silent.

Celeste reached for the envelope and opened it. There was a letter inside. She unfolded it and began reading.

Dear Celeste,

Melana and I waited for as long as we could . . .

"Clement!" she spoke with a sudden vibrancy. She looked up and around, as if perhaps they might still be here, no matter what the letter said. Only silence answered her. Her spirits slid back down, but not quite as far. Only vaguely did she wonder how security failed to log their visit. But then she remembered that, when she had last seen them, they had married and were planning to live on the Nebo—they and the two Mhyrnian boys. Hmm. The boys must be nearly men by now. She turned back to the letter.

. . . But duty called us back. You remember the transferal cube on the Nebo? That's how we came. Sorry to have come right into your apartment, but we needed to make sure you received the book.

She glanced at the book on the table. There was a tab set in it, part way through. It was a large book with what seemed to be easily more than a thousand pages—perhaps as much as two. She read on.

Melana asked me to specifically send her love . . .

Celeste's eyes stung for a moment. Her emotions were right below the surface. She sniffed once or twice, cleared the moisture from her eyes and read more.

I send mine too, as well as Kishkor and Oreb. They are remarkable men, now, even though little Oreb is only fifteen. They're away at the moment, giving out copies of this book on other worlds. We've got a whole galaxy to cover, between the four of us—more, if you count the Palmer colony. That one's millions of light years away—another galaxy. I just took them a few copies of the book. Palmer and his wife have children, now. Along with the other hundred or so Palmer took with him, they have set up quite an establishment.

All this brings me to purpose of our little visit, tonight. Melana and I came and waited for you. I do wish we could have stayed. Melana told me you were probably out with friends. She said that tonight of all nights, you would probably be out. We remember that it was ten years ago that you lost your son and husband. Of course, I'm sure all you need is for someone to remind you of that. Melana's looking over my shoulder as I write this and she's bawling me out for it. Sorry if I'm making things worse by talking about it. Making you feel worse is the exact opposite of why we came. The Book. It's the book that brought us here.

Oreb and Kishkor have translated all the inscriptions that line the walls of the Nebo—you remember?

A sudden flood of deep emotion flared up within Celeste at the mention of the hieroglyphs. For years she had fought against the incredible power of hope their intent had conveyed—fought to push them away, for they seemed to mock her deep grieving. Hope? In a universe that indiscriminately obliterated the very souls who struggled to save lives? She had embraced bitterness then. Now it lived with her. At that moment, she almost tossed the letter aside. The question of hope had appeared again in her life, and she wasn't ready for it. Still, she returned to the letter.

There is so much that is marvelous in those writings. You were right, back when you found me in the hall, trying to translate them. It changed me, fortunately, for the better. That's not to say I don't carry guilt and grief with me. I still have a really hard time whenever I think about Gaultor. I don't care what you or Melana said to me. I still think I caused his death. Maybe it's that heaviness I carry with me wherever I go that links me to you. I suspect that you still mourn for your son and husband.

It was Oreb that sent us tonight. We would have come eventually, but were working in a different sector of the galaxy on a distribution campaign. We were laying out our plans, identifying contacts on each world when Oreb stopped us and told us to come here tonight. Melana and I have long since learned that when Oreb or Kishkor have an impression like this, we go with it. So here we are—or were, I guess.

Now here's the amazing thing about this. While Melana and I were getting ready to come, I was checking the copy of the book we were going to leave you. It opened to a section that, when I read it, rang all kinds of bells and flashed all kinds of lights inside me. You see, I recognized the passage as the very one you read me, back on the Nebo—intented me, Melana corrects me. Anyway, I have marked the page and place. But before you read it, let me say to you that which I say to all to whom I give the book. Here goes.

Some of this you already know—better than I—perhaps better than anyone. The book is ancient, but its words—its truths are timeless, and they hold within them the keys to things—powers and wonders beyond anything we can imagine now. Some of it is history; some of it is philosophy—some of it science and some of it laws. It reveals the science of cause and effect in human behavior, as well revealing a way out of every terror of life. For this alone, its value should be priceless. But it does not stop there. It shows a glimpse of the ultimate fates of humanity based upon the decisions we make, for good or ill, and all the result of our own choices and intentions.

Celeste, there is a central thread to all of this. As I have studied the book, I have discovered that this central, unifying thread is, in fact, the very foundation for all human life—and it goes beyond that, even—all life itself; all existence. To know this finally gives purpose and hope and perspective to every human experience. And comfort, and direction.

*The book reveals who we truly are—*what *we truly are and our relationship to all things. Celeste—these things are marvelous beyond imagination! They exceed anything I ever believed possible. That is why the book and all it implies must reach across the galaxy—touching every world and every being.*

Your charge, now that you hold the book, is to share it. The Encyclopedia worlds will, ironically, be a greater challenge than a lot of others. I know the kind of folk that live there—folk like me: pure academicians. A lot of them won't believe the book is authentic. They will want proof. Some of them will reject it because they *didn't find it—pride. Others will read it and dismiss it as too simplistic—foolish rubbish. There will be some who will say that you wrote it fraudulently to advance yourself, your career, or to get rich. Worst of all, some will say you are addicted to some drug or even that you have gone insane from grief. Ignore all this. You* must *ignore it, for there will also be those who embrace it. The change in them will make it worth whatever you go through for it. At times, it will be hard to work silently on while you are being defamed, but you must continue. The worth of the book is far too great.*

There is one final point about the book itself that excites me. It is the suggested promise that more is yet to come—more to be added to the book, yes. There will always be more added. In this book is revealed how it is that we may avail ourselves of our full potential. We are but embryos compared to what we may become, and the book reveals how and by whom we can tap the infinite

and the eternal that is born inside us—human and Mestrate alike; brought with us in our births. You saw it—intented it, I mean. Remember?

Celeste remembered. It hurt to remember—carried too much responsibility to act, and she was not ready to even think about acting yet. The thought of it brought panic within her. She put the letter down and, fighting a swirling, palpitating panic that came to her all to frequently now, she grabbed her Nectaris and took a drink.

The book would not leave her alone. A war stirred within her. She moved to the window, away from the letter and the book. She looked out at the nebulae of Encyclopedia worlds. The great city spread away from her to the horizon—a world-sized campus; a super university, and yet this planet was home to only one discipline of study. There were a hundred twenty worlds in the Encyclopedia cluster; a hundred worlds of campus life and philosophies and politics magnified to a planetary scale. She shivered at the thought of trying to spread the book across one world, let alone more than a century's worth.

"I can't do it," she said to the window—to the city. "It's all I can do to get up in the morning, and you want me to convert twenty trillion people?"

Lightning flashed on the horizon. She could see clouds drifting in from the ocean to the west. She took another, steaming drink of Nectaris.

"I can't," she shook her head, her eyes stinging. "Can't you see that, Clement?"

Thunder rolled in low from the sea.

An hour passed, perhaps more. Celeste went into her bedroom, pulled down the covers and climbed in, telling the lights to go out.

She began her nightly struggle to try to go to sleep. She was sick inside.

The storm moved inland.

Midnight came and passed to one in the morning; two; three . . .

Celeste arose, pulling her robe around her angrily. She strode into the living room, the lightning flashing outside, the rain pattering on the windows.

The book lay on the table, its marker protruding a centimeter up from the binding. She looked at it. More lightning. Now she picked up the book and opening it to where Reeber had marked it, she began to read.

"I am . . ." the words sprang out at her, blending with their ultimate intent. It all came back to her—what she had perceived aboard the Nebo, but now it melded with the words.

She saw a man dressed in white robes—no, they were red. People were drawn to him in turn, a look of supernal joy crossing his or her face—a face before tired and worn. The blood red of their robes drained away as they touched him, leaving them white as the lily. He took each into his embrace with love, long sleeping awakened-the love of a father for his child.

Now he turned to look at Celeste. A flood of power, familiar and unquenchable, flooded through her at the touch of his gaze. His eyes were like fire; his hair whiter than wind-driven snow, and his voice was like the rush of winds or the roar of water or the crack of thunder. At the same moment it was still, quiet but piercing to the very core.

It was then that she saw them, rising from the waters: her husband Matt and Aaron, her son. In turn, they saw the One of magnificence and he, turning to them, opened his arms to them, and their faces burst forth in joy as they rushed into his embrace.

Celeste fell to her knees, her eyes too blurred to see anymore. She *would* see them again! *He* would bring them together again.

The awful, wearing grief of a decade drained away from her. Beyond, in the cool night, the rain fell in torrents and lightning flashed and the thunder rolled about the world—a world

sleeping beneath a darkness that would soon fall away forever.

III

Martin Palmer stood sullenly beside Cosgrove and his wife, watching the last of the ships leave the jungle world for more promising star systems.

"So, when are you leaving?" he asked, turning to the old man who, like he, leaned on a cane these days.

"Who says I'm leaving, Colonel?" Cosgrove replied, smiling. Lenore, beside him, watched the last starship until it was lost among the gold and lavender clouds of sunset. Then she turned back to Palmer and, bucking up, said something about dinner.

"I'm not so hungry tonight," Palmer said. "But thanks all the same. This is no reflection on your cooking, my dear—or Frank's. Food just doesn't taste so good anymore."

"You've got to eat," she answered.

"Says who? You? I appreciate your concern, but I'm not hungry." He turned to Cosgrove. "And *you* haven't answered me. When are Lenore and you leaving Riker?"

"And with all due respect, sir, I say again: don't worry about us," Cosgrove replied.

Palmer scowled but let the matter drop. He wasn't Cosgrove's superior anymore. Nothing was the same, anymore—not since Arleen died; not since his sons had left. Oh, they had tried to persuade him to come along. He knew they loved him—at least felt a sense of responsibility toward him. No, he knew deep down. They did love him. They just didn't understand. Despite everything he had tried to teach them, they just didn't seem grasp the ways of Zorl or the more vital truths contained in the book Reeber had brought him. There had even been a time of open rebellion against him and the things he deemed of importance. Fool's hill, Arleen had called it. *Wait on them*, she had said. *They'll come around some day. You can't order your sons around like military subordinates*, she had said. *Keep quiet—love them, and they will come around.* It was sound advice.

How he missed Arleen. She had proven to be a powerful force in the early days of colonization. He had learned early to listen to her wisdom, and so at her advice on this matter he waited for them to bring up the subject again. But now Arleen was gone, and the boys had never come back. Now they were out among the stars with their own wives and children—and values. There were fifty new colonies on as many worlds. Of all his sons, it had been Samuel, his youngest, who had had last reported to him.

Samuel. Palmer had had hopes for Samuel. He of all his sons had come closest to apologizing for the collective, enlightened, intellectual foolery of the lot. Samuel had taken a copy of the book with him, though Palmer had only discovered this belatedly. Samuel, at least, had the truth to go to. But now, Samuel was busy with the Terron colony. Every day, Palmer had waited for Samuel to return, and every night had passed with no visit.

Now, the last of the Riker people had left—all but he, Cosgrove and Lenore. Palmer could not blame any of them, not really. They had spent decades here, trying to cut a niche of civilization out of the hot, muggy rainforest. Perhaps they were right after all—all of them that had left. This jungle world was far too harsh a place to make any lasting colony. The life here was too primitive and, far too often, too alien for the tastes of even the most salted starman.

Palmer clutched at his left arm. The dull pain was back, playing tag with elusive pains

in his chest and back. He was no fool. He knew what the pains foretold. He took a deep breath, looking behind him at the great mountains whose snow-strewn summits were lost in perpetual clouds. There were sudden flashes of memory; of Markeeome—sudden flickerings of distant, silver glories burning among its clouds, now more than a century behind him. The pains in his chest flared again. For a moment, he could not breathe.

"Colonel," Cosgrove moved toward him. "You sick again?"

"I'm an old man!" Palmer answered wryly. "Gets so you think something's wrong if you're not sick every day."

Palmer watched Lenore look away uneasily.

"No need for all that," Palmer straightened himself. "I've got Melchin's syndrome, and I know there's no more anti-parasiticals left. All the medicals have all gone off world. They truly need them more out there than we do for an old incurable back here. It's all right, you two. That's the way it should be."

Their faces remained furrowed.

"Look—it's all right. Now we've been over this before. It was a conscious choice I made—we all made when the others came to me about moving away. All this was bound to wind up, sooner or later." He managed an expression of acceptance for them. "I guess it's going to be sooner.

"Okay. All right. Look, I'm not certain if my heart is failing for the last time now or not. Feels like it to me—same symptoms as last year when I almost died. Can't be certain, but let's assume it is. I want you take me up to the Place of Hope. Can you do that for me?"

"It's cold up there," Cosgrove answered after a short pause. "You sure that's what you really want?"

Palmer felt for the small rectangle of pluridium he always kept within his cloak. The time to deliver it to whoever would listen was drawing close. He knew this to the very center of his being. He nodded to Cosgrove. "Fly me up, would you? I'd climb up, as a pilgrim should, but I don't know that I'd make it."

"I'll go fire up a hoversled. Davis made sure we would have one working before he left."

"Thanks," Palmer said. "I just need to get something from my hut and I'll join you."

"I'll bring the sled there. Don't you exert yourself."

"Need any help?" Lenore asked as her husband headed down the thickly overgrown path to the landing pad.

"You are an angel, my dear," Palmer smiled. "Perhaps—yes."

She slid her arm under his. They walked back to his hut, he leaning on her for balance and she trying to boost him up and carry him all the way. They walked in silence for a few moments in the falling night. Above them, the glow gliders were already beginning to drift among the trees, sounding in the soft, moist winds of sunset; calling their chiming, mating signals to one another as they swung about in the breezes. At times, the night sounded as if the bells of a hundred churches were ringing, as if heralding some great event across the darkness.

"When I'm gone, you will leave, like the others, won't you?"

"Let's not worry about that just now," Lenore tried to bolster his spirits.

"Thanks for the kind encouragement, but I need to know. You *will* go. The others are right. It *is* too dangerous remain here. Promise me you will go."

Lenore was silent for a time, then nodded yes. "Frank's deathly loyal to you—you know that."

"He's as good a friend as any could ask," Palmer replied. "And I know that he believes in

the book and in the ways of Zorl—perhaps he does so because I do.

"His belief is genuine . . ."

"And he is, as you say, deathly loyal. I'm afraid that he will take my enthusiasm for starting things here too literally and stay here on vigil until *you* are both gone. Until now, *I* would have felt that way. I believe I understand things a little better, now. Once started, staying is not necessary for things to proceed as the Creator has planned them."

"You'll tell him that," Lenore said.

"Already have. I don't think he believes me. Wonderfully stubborn man. I think that you will have more power to pull him off this world than I do. You, more than anyone, have the power to ease his conscience toward me, if it stings him. All this hasn't failed here. My idea of what it should be just hasn't been right. You do know that it's what is to happen here, someday, that drove me to start here. Here, the Warriors of Light will begin their quest. I always assumed that they would arise from the civilization we would build here, but such is not the case. I've found things here that have shown me otherwise."

"Found things?"

"It's better if this world is forgotten until that day. I can see that now. Yes. Better if it is forgotten."

They arrived at Palmer's hut. Lenore helped him inside. New outcroppings of steel weed were pushing up through the stone floor again. Palmer stepped around it and, moving to the bedroom, went to the water-rotten bureau. He opened it with a squeak of rusting hinges and reached inside, removing his Vanguard uniform and the robe of the Most High Nobleman. It took him a long time to change. He had gotten used to doing things more slowly, but that did not mean that the scars of age did not still frustrate him. Mercifully, today, it did not seem to matter. He donned the uniform. It hung loose on his frail frame, but he did not care. He next put on the shimmering green robes of the order of Zorl and then, carefully, he transferred the sealed, hinged, book-like rectangle of pluridium into the swaths of the robe and returned to the living room. Lenore, who had taken a chair, stood, though not without a little steadying of herself. Palmer smiled. "We're nothing but a couple of old wretches."

"Speak for yourself," she smiled back, and helped him outside to wait for the sled.

The stars emerged overhead. The edge of the great galaxy swelled into the eastern sky like a spearhead of sparkling points. Otherwise the heavens were all but black with intergalactic void. The glow-gliders sailed among the massive trees, flashing between colors, tolling to each other. Palmer saw occasional dark shapes swoop among the gliders; feeding on the glowing, orchid-shaped creatures when they could capture one, which didn't happen very often. One dark predator caught a glider now, and the cool brightness of the prey flickered out in the silhouette of closing, teethed jaws.

For just a moment, Palmer flashed back aboard the Gabriel—seeing the terrible countenance of Echion thrashing in tantrum-like rage across space for him. It was this that Palmer feared most, now. All the new colonies were so dangerously close to the double black holes—the harbor stars as Methuselah had called them. So terribly close. Perhaps it was that proximity to the imprisoned Dragon of Night that had caused the rift between him and his sons. Already, Echion was working across stellar distances in an attempt to destroy the ones who would ultimately see his demise—be the cause of it. Palmer was certain that, even imprisoned as he was, Echion would employ every means at his disposal to decimate the life that was growing up among the stars around him. And now, suddenly, Palmer understood the wisdom of Polyphemus in sending so many people to settle the stars here. Palmer and his sons would be

hard to single out—hard to find, and then destroy. Wisdom. Yes.

The hoversled dropped silently in the last glimmerings of daylight. Its silver hull, part encrusted with bio-rust, still gleamed beneath the stars and the glow-gliders. It fired up its lights and came to rest before the hut. Palmer and Lenore hobbled over to it.

* * *

Samuel Gaultor Palmer put the book down abruptly. His wife did not stir. He sat for a moment, looking out into space, a profound feeling suddenly washing over him. Quietly, he arose and began dressing.

"What is it?" his wife asked.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

She shifted around for a time, then sat up, watching him dress. "What is it," she persisted.

"Dad," he replied. "I've got to go see dad."

"Now? It's the middle of the night and he's hours away. And the drive—you, yourself said it needed to be fixed. It's the only ship we've got. Can't you at least wait until you can fix it?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I'd better go."

"Why? Let's wait and be sure before you take off and maybe get stuck on Riker, and then I'll never see you again!"

"Carrie," his voice took on an edge of irritation. "I've got to do this. I'll be all right. Don't worry about me. Go back to sleep."

She scowled at him, reached over and turned out the lights while he was still putting on his boots. He sighed and headed for the door.

"I'll be back soon," he said. "Love you."

She did not answer. He headed out into the cold night and toward the starship.

* * *

The hoversled moved carefully into the clouds that crowned the great mountains. Palmer watched Cosgrove guide the three of them carefully through the mist. He had slowed almost to a crawl and double-checked his position before making each and every course adjustment. It was frustrating to Palmer. Cosgrove had made this flight a thousand times. Why didn't he just move in? The proximity buffers would sound if they got too close to anything dangerous. He almost said as much, but bit his tongue. Cosgrove was doing this for him. Let him do it his own way.

At last the sled touched down. Cosgrove and Lenore were off it fast, moving around to help Palmer down. Again, he almost grumbled a complaint that he could do it himself, but he kept quiet. They all moved slowly across the snow toward the cave.

Warmth met them as they wound their way inside the mountain. It was not the warmth of a fire, but more the falling away of the cold winds outside. Palmer could still see his breath as they rounded the corner into the great chamber that glowed with the ice algae they had placed here decades ago when they had begun work.

It was like the Place of Hope on Mhyrn—deliberately so—by design. Palmer had ordered work begun on it even before the first temporary shelters of colonization were far along in their construction. He gazed around him now, seeing the murals shine in the varying colored illuminations of the numerous varieties of the ice algae. The murals were painted in them.

As on Mhyrn, there were scenes of the works of the Creator here—scenes taken from the

book Reeber had brought; scenes of the works of salvation from the End Star of Grief. Foremost among these was the depiction of Gaultor, surrounded in flames and golden lightnings, facing his final sacrifice that had saved worlds without end.

A flood of grief and guilt swept across Palmer. He could never be certain exactly how, but he had suspected from the day of Procyx's destruction that Gaultor had done something to save them from the demon, and in so doing had ultimately forfeited his life.

What I do, I have done willingly, Gaultor had said—his last words to Palmer. That was the clue that Gaultor had known he would not survive the eternal purging of the End Star of Grief. He must have used the Golden Death to save Palmer's life in that battle with the demon and lied about the matter so that the work would move forward to completion. Gaultor had known Palmer well in not telling him, for if Palmer had guessed the truth, it would surely have made him hesitate before proceeding. It might even have frustrated the work. Palmer felt sure, looking back, that had he known that Gaultor was going to his death, he would surely have stopped the Mhyrnian and demanded that they share the burden—even if it was to mean his own death as well. Guilt! The guilt about that had almost plunged Palmer into despair some seven years into the work of new settling—the year of the real troubles. Doubt had led to depression that had fueled into a firestorm of paralyzing guilt and grief.

It had been then that Reeber had come with the book.

Palmer had tried to get Reeber to tell him something—anything about the battle at the gates of the temple, but Reeber would say nothing. The seer in Palmer had looked into Reeber at that moment and seen that he *was* keeping a secret—a charge that he could never violate. It was then that Palmer had known what he had long suspected. He did not know the specifics—did not need to, really. He knew that Gaultor had used the Golden Death in some way to save them both so that Procyx could be destroyed, knowing full well that he would go to his own death for it.

"This is good, here. I'm home. Dear friends, you may go back now," Palmer said with determination to Cosgrove and Lenore.

"What?"

"I intend to spend my last days here—or hours. Whatever there is left for me, and I intend to do so alone."

"Colonel . . . Martin . . ."

"Frank! This is what I want. This is where I want to die. Now please, let me."

Cosgrove stood in the dim light, his features set—a battle stirring up inside him.

"I am dying. I know it. You know it, too. I want to die here—my last place of hope."

"But it's so cold here. Can't we at least go get some blankets—food . . ."

"I begin my fast," Palmer said. His arm began to twinge again. "You know, how I have told you about Gaultor. I want to do this, and my uniform keeps me warm enough." He smiled at them. "Please, good and loyal friends. Let me go."

Lenore and Cosgrove stood silent. Palmer felt it. Now was the time. He reached inside his robe and pulled out the sealed, hinged, pluridium rectangle. He handed it to Cosgrove.

"What's this?"

"A prophecy concerning Gaultor and me. I have never looked at it. Gaultor said it was to be opened upon my death. I give it to you. When I am gone, spread it among the fifty worlds. It is to be added to the words of the book."

Cosgrove took it. Palmer removed the robes of Zorl.

"This is for one of my sons. You will know to whom it shall be given at the right time. I conferred the powers it represents upon him when he was but a baby. Sooner or later, he will

come around and take upon himself the responsibilities of leadership he already carries inside him, but does not know it."

Cosgrove took the scintillating, iridescent robes. They seemed to shine with more than the reflected light of the ice algae that filled the great chamber with its modest light.

"Now," Palmer stepped forward. "I want to say some things." He took Cosgrove's hand in a warm, double grasp. Holding it tightly, looking into his eyes, he saw things—as Gaultor must have seen things when he gave Palmer the powers of a Most High Nobleman to Zorl. He smiled warmly at Cosgrove. "Your posterity shall fight alongside the Warriors of Light in the great battles that lie ahead," he said quietly. "It shall be as a holy war in those days, and your sons and daughters will play a vital part in it. You and your sweet one here are blessed among all."

Palmer saw only Frank Cosgrove again—tired from a lifetime of struggles; weakened from the vibrant Frank Cosgrove that had fought beside him at RoseStar; a man confused at the multiplicity of ironies that plagued the human condition. "Don't worry, my friend," Palmer said comfortingly. "We cannot see all things now. But the promise stands—older than this universe: all *shall* resolve itself for good in the end."

He and Cosgrove held that grip for a time, and then Palmer turned to Lenore. "You are the best thing that ever happened to Frank," he said.

"I know," she replied. "I tell him that all the time."

They laughed together. "But it is true," Palmer said. "Take good care of my loyal friend; temper him; fight beside him when needs be. Royalty, you are—more than you can guess."

They smiled and, for a brief moment, she reached out and hugged him.

"Now, let's part thus," Palmer said. "No more grief, now. Procyx is gone—worlds flourish and The Book spreads its wonders across the stars. These are marvelous days. These are days of new beginnings. The time is soon at hand for us when we shall no longer have any cause to sorrow—a brighter day. I will see you then and there."

They turned and left.

Palmer watched them go—heard the hoversled fire up, and that was all. From then on, there was only the sound of the wind outside.

Suddenly, the cramping in his arm and chest and back twisted Palmer into contorted agony. The meters-long parasites that lived within his circulatory system were reproducing again. This time, there would be enough new ones to block his circulation completely. He realized this with a flash of terror while struggling beneath the agony. He could not breathe. Seconds of breathless, excruciating pain dragged into minutes . . .

"Please," Palmer cried out fervently in his mind. "Let me finish this!"

The attack ended abruptly. Palmer staggered against the wall, exhausted, gasping for breath.

Dark thoughts plagued him. Why hadn't he gone offworld with the others? They, at least, had the precious anti-parasiticals that could cure him. He didn't have to go through this! Why, at least, hadn't he given Cosgrove the power of the Golden Death to heal him? Why be alone up here? Why die alone? There was no way back. He would die here. A new round of panic swept over him.

Death.

The end of existence.

Oblivion. Part of him felt some relief at *that* notion—the end of all suffering. Part of him rebelled. It wasn't right. What a horrible irony, life—to come into existence, and then no matter how you conducted yourself, good or ill, all that lay ahead was oblivion. What waste! What

horrible, senseless waste!

He looked around him at the walls—the Place of Hope. Hope! He wrenched beneath the despairing weight of defeat. *Place of Hope*? Place of *lost* hope! And the final mockery of all he held dear hung in oblivious decay all over the lower walls beneath the murals. The vines of Riker's Place of Hope had not survived. These were not like the seemingly royal, white-blossomed vines of Mhyrn, but instead a weak, frail undergrowth that lived at the very ground level, hiding beneath the lowest of the rainforest's undergrowth. All the vines here were so much dead dry wood.

But something within Palmer made him move. "Only the dead wood," the echoed words of Gaultor came to him across a century. He took a deep, painful breath and began moving about the walls, snapping off brittle, dead twigs and branches. He placed them in the large, circular pit in the center of the Place of Hope, as he had helped Gaultor do back at Mhyrn. He moved around, methodically working, ending finally beneath the mural of Gaultor. Here, he paused, looking up.

"In the end, we all die alone," he said to the image after a moment. "Don't we?" He looked down, ready to pull the last of the sterile, skeletal vines away when he saw it. It wasn't much—a single bud of green, but it lived. The vine lived! Carefully, he pruned around it—gently broke away the last of the dead wood leaving, ultimately, the tiny bud and several strands of vine that looked like they also might, somehow, come around. He put the last of the dead wood into the pit and then came forward, kneeling before it.

"It's been so long," he spoke to the walls after a time of reflection. "I only hope . . ."

Hope! There it was. Hope. He closed his eyes and raising his hands above his head began to speak.

"Fire of all light," the words came hard. He stumbled through them. Gaultor had spoken all this in Mhyrnese. How could he . . . "Fire of Holiness; fire of all life; Fire of the pure of heart; Fire of everlasting communion . . ." A word came suddenly into his mind. "Shekinah! Oh, Thou whose name is most holy to be spoken. Hear me, I beseech Thee! Wilt Thou Come unto this humble Place of Hope? I pray Thee—dwell here upon this place. Have mercy. Hear the plea of one unworthy before All Righteousness."

Palmer's eyes were closed, head bent. He waited in silence—his arms tiring, but he yet held them up.

Wind. The sound of wind; a rushing of waters veiled by the roar of the winds—and light. Palmer could see it through his eyelids. His breathing quickened, his pulse racing. He opened his eyes. Flames rose before him in a swirling, majestic pillar. Palmer was so startled that he all but fell backward. Hope!

He looked around. The scenes of the works of the Creator shone in the same brilliant intensity as they had on Mhyrn; all that had been represented as providing light shone with an illumination that was their own—far above the humble glowing of the ice algae. They burned with a flaming intensity now—as if…as if answering the holy flames in their portrayal of that which was holy. A powerful thrill exploded through Palmer. His eyes blurred quickly, and all he could do was to fall upon his face in thanksgiving. It was so close again—the joys of Serenity, of the City of Unity, of Methuselah.

Pain gripped him abruptly. He arched upward, reaching out for the fire and falling backward against the wall. There were no breaths anymore. The lights of dizziness and oxygen deprivation began to spin before his vision, merging and flowing with the roar of the flames. He tried to speak. Nothing came forth and it was then that he saw him.

Standing in the flames, surrounded by a light far brighter than the sun, stood Gaultor.

The fires spun about the Mhyrnian who now held out his hands to Palmer. He struggled to his feet dizzy, engrossed in agony—breathless. Behind Gaultor there now opened the heavens of suns and oceans of burning fires he had seen highest above the City of Unity. He saw other people in its enthralling radiance: Arleen—his dear Arleen; his father and mother; Matt Jenson; Evanna. Like Gaultor, they waited for him.

"Come into the fire, Martin" Gaultor said quietly through the flames. "Come home."

Now above them all there came a greater brightness—piercing, dazzlingly beautiful. It was as the light Palmer had seen radiating within the glories of the Golden Death before Gaultor, moments before the Vanguard Zorl had exploded. Palmer knew *this* light! This *was* home. At long, long last—Home!

With his last ounce of failing consciousness, Palmer stumbled forward—pulled himself up and walked on into the fire . . . and his heart was singing . . .

* * *

Cosgrove and Lenore gazed at the mountains. The clouds rolled forth as if from them, covering the skies about them, flashing with lightning and thunder. No living thing moved. The whole world waited silent beneath it. Cosgrove started at the arrival of a man behind him. Turning, he saw that it was Palmer's youngest son Samuel.

"Where's my father?" he asked. Lenore turned a tear-stained face toward him.

"At the Place of Hope," Cosgrove replied, and a tremendous crack of thunder pealed across the jungle. The clouds above the mountain boiled and churned, now, pouring out and upward across kilometers of sky; rising upward into powerful thunderheads that rolled forth to cover the heavens in a thick overcast.

"How is he?"

"He went up there to die."

"I've got to go to him . . ." Samuel started to move toward the hoversled, but Cosgrove took his arm, shaking his head.

"He's gone already."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know how I know. I just know that he is gone."

"I . . . I want to get his body. I want to bury him properly."

Again, Cosgrove shook his head. Instead, he handed Samuel the green robes of Zorl. "He meant this for you. I am sure of it, as he said I would be." Samuel took the robes, looking up at the turbulent storms that churned about the mountains.

"But I'm not . . . Oh, Dad," he said quietly. "Dad—I wanted to tell you . . . I wanted to . . ."

"And take this," Cosgrove handed him the sealed, book-like rectangle of pluridium. "We can open it now. Your father said we're to tell everyone, everywhere, what it says."

Samuel took it. He held it for long moments, sniffing—wiping the moisture from his cheeks.

"Open it," Lenore urged quietly.

Samuel removed the seal. He opened the tiny plates and read aloud: *Be of good cheer. For as you have seen us go, even at this moment, so shall we return in the fullness of days. And it shall be that we will return in that power and great glory given us of the Creator, that we might bring forth, finally, the EndStar of Joy.*

"What? I . . . I don't understand . . ." Samuel said, and suddenly, a sun-bright flash of

golden brilliance pulled their gaze toward the mountains. The thunder melted smoothly away into a singing, ringing drone of heart-wrenching beauty. The clouds dissolved as if parted wide by some, surging shock wave. From within the lingering cradling mists, immersed in searing filaments of yellows and golds and ambers, the sleek starship hovered. It turned about—surrounded by lightning-bright glories and flaming storms. After a moment's hesitation, the Vanguard Zorl lifted in power toward the stars.

The End

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.